

## St Augustine's Centre, Halifax, UK

### English for Life in the UK

#### Season 2 - Episode 30 - How to Learn a Language

July 2021

Mark Hello, and welcome to the podcast English for Life in the UK. This podcast is for those people who want to improve their English by listening to native English speakers, talking about a range of subjects.

I'm joined today by Christine. Hello, Christine. How are you?

Christine I'm well, thank you, Mark. I'm enjoying the sunshine.

Mark Yes - it's a lovely sunny day here, at the moment.

So, today, we're going to talk about how to learn a language - which seeing that<sup>1</sup> that is what this podcast is all about, it's rather strange we've never done an episode on this before.

This is going to be the last episode of Season 2, of this podcast. We're going to take a break after this, for a few weeks. So we thought we'd finish by just reflecting a bit on how do you learn a language, and talk a little bit about our experience. Both Christine and I are teachers of English - we also have learnt another language, each of us, and we're obviously part of a team that teaches English as well.

So, we're going to reflect a little bit of what our own experience has told us, what some of the research tells us and I've also interviewed two of our intermediate students, who've made good progress in learning English, and I've asked them what they've found most useful.

So, that's the context of this episode.

So, Christine - tell us a little bit ... where would ... what would you say to start with, if I said - so what do you think is important when you're learning a language?

Christine Well, I think the first thing you need to think about is: what do you want to use the language for? - and it's going to be very different, depending on what your answer to that question is.

I mean, for example, I try to learn the language if I'm going to visit a country as a tourist. But the way I need to learn the language for being a tourist, is very different.. for ... to how it is if I want to live there. I mean, I think most people who listen to this podcast probably want to live in the UK and so want to use the language daily and make their life in the country in that language. But - I mean, some people might want to study, might want to take up a profession, for example - and then they're going to need to learn certainly, to read and also to write, quite academic English.

Mark Yes - I agree with you Christine, that's an important question. Maybe what we should say is that the work that we've done in teaching English and in this podcast, is very much for people in that second category - who want to be able to live in this country and to use English in an everyday way. That's what we focus the main attention on. So what else would you say is important?

---

<sup>1</sup> 'seeing that....' In this context it is not about seeing visually but rather means considering the fact that... , you could also say 'as' or 'given that'.

Christine Well, another thing I would say: is that people are very different, as well as having different aims - they are actually different types of people: and some people are quiet and they learn best studying by themselves, and some people are much better when they are inter-acting with others. I know that I rely quite a lot on looking - by sight - I'm a visual learner is what you would call it. I can still bring to mind<sup>2</sup> a page of the vocabulary notebook that I had, as a child, learning French at school. If I want to know whether a noun is masculine or feminine, I still can recall that visual image. But of course some people don't do that. So, for you ... if you're listening to this – think of what you like – what works best for you.

(4 minutes 22 seconds)

Mark I think that's really helpful. The other thing I'd say is: it does depend at what stage you're at, in your learning of the language. So certainly, for beginners, I would say, a lot of visual things are often very useful for people, in the early days. So, being able to look at a picture and being able to recognise some of the words for the things in that picture and then moving on to, perhaps, being able to describe what's in that picture. That's a good way, I think, for beginners.

The other thing for beginners is very much repetition. I think, actually, repetition is important *at every stage* of learning a language - but especially, for a beginner. You are not always going to be able to pick up how to say something the first time and actually you've got to keep repeating it, with some feedback from people ....so that you know whether you're getting it right. So, I think a lot of repetition for beginners, a lot of visual stuff and relatively limited vocabulary, in the early stages, is fine. You don't need to learn to ...a very sophisticated, wide-ranging, vocabulary in the early stages, but obviously as you become an "Intermediate" learner, which is more what we've focussed on, with the Podcast, then you need a wider range of approaches, I think.

Christine Yes – but still, what you are saying – repetition is still very important, I think. Another thing that's very important – you need to take in, you need to listen to – or read - but you need to take in a lot of different language - you know, a whole lot more than you are able to produce yourself. So don't expect to be able to say everything, for example, that Mark and I are saying, now. You don't need to be able to talk like that - but you need to listen to lots of different sources – lots of different types of English language – you can learn a whole lot, just by listening.

Mark Yes – one of the pieces of research that I looked at – I actually got to know it through a French podcast that I used<sup>3</sup> and I found very useful when I was learning French and which the ... some of the principles behind ... I have brought into doing this podcast which we now do, for learning English.

And in the French podcast, he quotes an American professor of linguistics called Stephen Krashen. And he makes the distinction between *learning* a language and *acquiring* a language. He said that children, young children, as they grow up, they *acquire* their native language; they don't sit down and learn it systematically, they *acquire* it. And he says that's actually one of the most powerful forms of learning a language and so he says that the evidence is that what you need, particularly as you get to an intermediate level of language, that you need lots of input of that native language. So, that means lots of listening to people, lots of reading – reading at different levels, reading different types of things – it might be a newspaper, it might be a book, it might be an advert, it might be a leaflet that you've seen. The listening can be a podcast, it can be the radio, it can be listening to people talking in the street, in a shop that you go into. It can be watching a video and both

---

<sup>2</sup> to 'bring to mind' means to remember or recall

<sup>3</sup> 'Inner French' is the name of the podcast I used, produced by Hugo Cotton a French teacher

listening and watching at the same time. So - lots of input of the native language – and as you gradually acquire an understanding of that language – because that’s what you’re doing when you’re listening – you’re trying to understand, make sense of what it is you're hearing - and as you do more and more of that, you will learn more about that language. You will acquire - start to acquire - that language and then you will be able to speak it more. And so, that's the stage where you can have a go at speaking, at an early stage, but the more listening you've done, the more confident you will be about being able to use that language as you talk to other people. What do you think about that idea, Christine?

(9:15)

Christine

I think that - I'm sure you're quite right .... I'm sure you're quite right. I want to put in one more thing - actually there is a place for beginners: listening to the language - even without trying to make sense of it - just to become familiar with the sounds of that language - and that can be really helpful: listening to natural language and just letting the sounds wash over you<sup>4</sup> without understanding - it's an important ...it's one aspect of language acquisition, I think, as you would say, rather than language learning. It's certainly what happens with children.

Mark

Yes - I would agree. I would agree. Another thing that he says which I think is really important - is that: as you are starting to speak and write the language, you need to find a context to do that which is supportive. So you need to find a teacher that you get on well with, or a group of other students, or a group of people who are already native speakers of that language, who are going to be supportive of you, as you learn. Because one of the key things about learning a language is you mustn't worry about making mistakes. Making mistakes is perfectly fine. In fact, you can almost say it is an essential part of the learning process. So having a go - it doesn't matter if you don't quite get it right - if you get the odd word wrong or the grammar wrong or you can start the sentence but don't know how to finish it: all those things are entirely natural, for people learning a language. And so the important thing is that you have a go at that, but also that you do it in a context where you are going to feel supported - other people who are also going through the same thing - because we do know - if you feel stressed and anxious about something - then you don't learn very well. So you want to find that kind of supportive atmosphere in which you can try out that language.

Christine

I want to add ... to pop in there, Mark, to say of course, we still make mistakes in English - you know - those of us who are very advanced English learners - we still make mistakes - it's just part of language.

Mark

That's right. People who are regular listeners to our podcast, and who have also followed it on the transcript, will have noticed that we quite regularly don't finish our sentences or we stop in the middle of a sentence, and start saying something slightly different, and often when I read back the transcript, I realise I have made mistakes - sometimes, made grammatical mistakes - so people in the advanced ... you know - well-educated people - in their own language, are still learning, so accepting knowing that you are not going to be perfect at it - that you're going to ... that actually it's a slow process - that's the other thing, I think. There probably are a few people who are very natural linguists - who can learn a language very quickly. But for most people, it's a marathon not a sprint; it's a commitment you have to make over quite a period of time.

Christine

I'm not sure "a marathon" is such a good image because, immediately - all the time, you are improving - it's like ... it's not that there's a finishing line - it's just a long enjoyable walk, through a new country, a new language, or something - and you can run - some of us will run and some of us will amble<sup>5</sup>, but we're always picking up new things. And, of course, sometimes we forget things too.

---

<sup>4</sup> to allow something, in this case a language, to 'wash over you' means letting it happen without thinking much about it, to absorb the sounds without trying to understand the individual words

<sup>5</sup> amble means to walk slowly without necessarily having a destination in mind

- Mark *(Laughing)* Particularly as we get to our age, Christine! I really like that image - I much prefer that - I agree to the marathon - the idea of a long walk that goes at different paces - and also sometimes you might decide you are going to repeat a part of that walk - you know, repeat a part of your learning of the language, because you know that will help just to reinforce it.
- Christine One thing we haven't said yet, and I really really recommend to people, is to get themselves a notebook and to make notes of what ...things you hear, if you are living in this country, already - just things you hear in the street, just note it down and listen, and read ..look back at your notes at the end of the day or the end of the week. Just that active noting of things can be really helpful. It's like me and my vocabulary book from all those years ago.
- Mark Yes - I think it probably doesn't work for everybody - but for a lot of people, the idea of keeping a vocabulary list is a good idea and using this idea of "flash cards" where you might write on one side of the bit of paper, the word in English, and then on the other side, the meaning of that word in your home language, or an image is another way doing it - and then regularly practising and testing yourself on those things.
- Christine And there are - you know, these days there are smart phones, there are many apps that we can use to help us.
- Mark There are indeed. There are very good translation apps; there are very good dictionaries, including ones that handle phrases very well, not just individual words, because I think that's a more useful kind of dictionary. I agree: lots of technological support available to people.
- Christine You reminded ... I thought of that because you talked about flash cards - you can get apps that create flash cards for you.
- (16:45)  
Mark Yes - they can. The other thing I would say is the importance of having a routine. Part of what we were saying about, you know, that this is a long journey to learn a language and actually, it will help your journey if you have a routine to it. So, If you try to do a bit of listening or reading of the language you're trying to learn, trying to acquire every day - try to put a period of time aside every day. For some people they prefer perhaps to work in short amounts of time, and others might want to put a whole hour or two hours aside to concentrate on it - but the idea of having a routine or trying to do a little bit of that other language, almost every day, that will definitely help you for that progress - to feel you're making progress.
- Christine I think this relates .. links back to something I said at the beginning - it depends on who you are and what you want to do with the language. But of course, we're all interested in different things and if you're following a language programme, for example, you might not be discussing things you are particularly interested in, so I recommend that you read - you know look for articles, look for things that interest you - the subject matter is important to you.
- Mark I would agree and that's certainly something we've tried to do in the podcast. So let's have a bit of a reflection, Christine - you and I have probably been involved in more episodes than almost anybody else - what's your reflection on what we've managed to do with the podcast?
- Christine Well, I think we've done quite well really Mark, over the years we've been doing it - and we have taken the *English for Life in the UK Citizenship Test*<sup>6</sup> as the starting point. So we have tried to include the subjects that people who want to live in this country and

---

<sup>6</sup> published by the HM Government UK

want to eventually get British citizenship - we have included those subjects - but we've managed to cover topics which I hope people would find interesting. I mean, of course, we've mainly chosen things that interest us. You know - things very topical at points.

Mark We've certainly done a wide range. It's worth, perhaps, me quoting some of the figures for people who might be interested. I mean we've done over 50 episodes<sup>7</sup> now across the two seasons. So we've covered, that means, at least 50 subjects and sometimes more than that, within an episode. So, we know we've had over 55,000 listens to our episodes. So that's not 55,000 different people, because, obviously, there are a number of people who have listened to a number of episodes. Our regular listenership is probably around 700 - something like that. Our most popular episodes have had over 3000 listens and the other thing that we've found most interesting is that, from the information we get back from the podcast sites, we know that we have been listened to in more than 110 different countries, around the world. So whilst about 40% of our listeners are from .. are in the UK, then the other 60% are from all - a wide range of countries around the world and that's fascinating to know.

So now, I've interviewed two of our students who have made good progress in their English and I asked them to tell me a bit about what they found the most useful.

**(Music)** (20:12)

Mark Nelson - thank you very much for joining us. Tell our listeners a little bit about yourself: where are you from? How long have you been in this country? What is your native language? When did you start learning English? Some of that.

Nelson OK - Well, my name Nelson Gomez - I am from El Salvador in Central America. I have been living in the UK about 1 year and 4 months and I studied English in my country - my first language is Spanish. I remember I started to learn English in 2015 - but I didn't practise English in my country, but yes arriving to the UK: it's a good option to learn English, because the life here asks [*requires*] you to speak English - you have to do it.

Mark Absolutely. Absolutely. So tell me a bit about what have you found most useful in improving your English since you've been here?

Nelson Well - I think the daily life here - you know - go to the supermarket, go to the surgery, to the chemist - just you know: more vocabulary - you have to speak and try to listen what people are saying, in the post office - and yes - I think maybe listening to music in English is a good option.

Mark Have you been to classes? - and if so, what did you find useful about the classes?

Nelson Yes - I was taking classes in St Augustine's Centre. I learn a lot from them. Because in my country, I studied American English and it's quite different from the British English - I learn more vocabulary, some grammar rules that I have forgotten.

Mark And have you listened to the podcasts, yourself?

Nelson Yes, Yes - I really like the podcast. I remember last year when all of us had to be at home<sup>8</sup>, it was very useful to listen to the podcasts.

Mark And what advice would you give to somebody who's recently arrived in this country, and who's got a bit of English, but wants to improve it?

---

<sup>7</sup> having checked since recording this episode the actual number of episodes is 60

<sup>8</sup> This was the period we called "lockdown" when the Government restricted travel and movement of people in the first period of the Covid-19 or the Coronavirus epidemic.

Nelson OK - maybe try to listen carefully - listen to the people when they are talking to you. Listen carefully, because you can identify some words that you know and hope that people pronounce that word - may be listen and using the English, you can learn more vocabulary. Maybe, if you can, listen to music and reading the lyrics is very useful and if you... can read books for children is very good because it's easy English and you can learn more vocabulary and it's very useful. - Yes - just go to the street and try to talk with the people.

Mark And, I think, Nelson - you have actually been helping out with some of the classes.

Nelson Last year - I was doing volunteering - teaching basic English.

Mark So you were helping the beginners, weren't you - who were just starting out? That's been really helpful.. thank you very much,.

Nelson Thank you very much for taking consideration - it's just incredible for us.

**(Music)** (24:54)

Mark Good afternoon, thank you very much for agreeing to doing this, Bukky.  
So first of all, can you tell me - say how long you have been in this country?

Bukky I've been in the country since [for] 5 years now.

Mark 5 years - yes. And what was your English like when you arrived and how is it now?

Bukky When I arrived, I thought I could speak English - but the way and the sounds of English in my country is not the same as here.

Mark And you've made a lot of progress in those 5 years?

Bukky Yes - I have.

Mark So - tell me - what's helped you? What has helped you to improve your English?

Bukky Before I joined St Augustines's English classes, what I used to do was to listen very well, to anyone who was speaking English to me, because if it was too fast, then I wouldn't hear or understand what was being said.

After I joined the class, I [was] still listening and speaking as much as I can. So that has helped me and with the different topics and just joining in the group, the conversations and yes - those are the things - like trying to speak as it comes to my mouth and learning with the response I get, when people speak to me back.

Mark That's lovely - that's lovely. Thank you. And have you listened to the podcast?

Bukky Yes I did listen to some.

Mark Not all of it - but some of the episodes. Did you find that useful?

Bukky Yes - because it gives me more knowledge and when people speak I can see and it was more helpful.

Mark Have you used the transcripts? The written version of the podcast?

Bukky Yes - actually I do and my son has used that.

Mark And have you both ... what we suggested to people is that they listen to the podcast, but then they also listen and read the transcript at the same time. Have you tried that?

- Bukky Yes. Yes.
- Mark And you found that useful?
- Bukky Yes
- Mark That's great. So any other advice? What advice would you give to somebody who has just arrived in this country and whose English is not very good?
- Bukky What I advise is if that person can find a class - an English class - then just register and join and most importantly, just listen - don't rush to speak to just listen and try and catch up and just speak out as much as you can and you will just find it easier, later.
- Mark That's excellent. What about in the classes? What have you found most useful in the classes?
- Bukky In the classes is the conversation - the way we talk in the group - so that has really been helpful, also.
- Mark That's brilliant. Anything else you want to say Bukky?
- Bukky I just want to say thank you for making it easy, for making some of us comfortable, of speaking English, now. I know it's not really sound, [but] at least I know I've made an effort. I just want to say thank you and to you and the others.
- Mark OK - You've done very well and I think you've made excellent progress. Your English now is good and I think the advice you've given there is really helpful to people. And you're right - lots of listening - just have a go at speaking, don't worry if you make mistakes and then - you will gradually get there and it's not a quick, overnight job, it's something you have to keep working at, and that's something you've been doing and you're benefitting from that.
- Bukky And one more thing, I just remembered - asking for a repeat [repetition], like if someone spoke to you and you don't understand - just ask "Please can you ...?" Just ask nicely if that person can repeat what they've said, so that helps me too.
- Mark Ok - Listen - thank you very much, Bukky - that's been really helpful.
- Bukky Thank you for having me.

***(Music) (30:12)***

- Christine That's interesting - I think Bukky made a very important point - a very good suggestion - asking people to repeat - if you don't understand what somebody says, why not ask them to say it again or say it again slowly? Many many people will be happy to do that.
- Mark And I thought, particularly, Nelson's point about using everyday life, things you are naturally doing everyday, just to help you with your English: so he talked about going to the shops and listening to the conversations people are doing, [having] in the shops and trying yourself to have the conversation, when you are buying something in the shops. Or listening to conversations in the street and obviously we would hope when people come to the St Augustine's Centre, that that is a good opportunity for them to engage with a number of other people, some of us native English speakers, and all of them wanting to improve their English, and it is a very supportive space there, for that.
- Christine And if you're not local, you might be able to find somewhere in the area that you live in, too.

Mark And I particularly liked Nelson's idea of choosing children's books to read, because obviously, the level of the language in a children's book is going to be just that bit more accessible. And then hopefully, in time, you'd be able to move on to more adult books.

Christine And if you go to the library they often have a teenage section or an adult literacy section where they have books with older themes but simpler language. You can ask the librarian for that - certainly, in this country, you can.

We're going to take a break now for a number of weeks - we'd love to hear from you - you could tell us what works for you in terms of learning a language. You could tell us any comments - you can still contact us with any comments you have on this podcast or any of our previous ones. We'd be very happy to hear from you. We won't necessarily get back to you immediately, if you email us, but we will monitor the emails and certainly look every week or so and we'll get back to you. And, of course, our email is : [englishforlifeintheuk@gmail.com](mailto:englishforlifeintheuk@gmail.com)

Mark Thank you very much, Christine, for joining me on this *special* episode, I think we can say, talking a bit about how we learn a language. We hope that you have found the podcast useful in your language learning and that you've been interested in this episode. We are going to take a break now but we will be back in a few weeks' time and if you keep subscribing to the podcast on your regular podcast site, then it will begin .. it will appear, as soon as we start to publish new episodes.

Christine We don't know when that will be, exactly - but it will be sometime in the autumn.

**(Music)** (33:50)

Mark You can get the transcript for this episode and all others - through our website:

[www.staugustinescentrehalifax.org.uk](http://www.staugustinescentrehalifax.org.uk)

That's also where you can find out how to support our work, including making a donation.

You can contact us by email; we have a specific email address for this podcast, which is:

[englishforlifeintheUK@gmail.com](mailto:englishforlifeintheUK@gmail.com)

and there is also a general email address for the Centre:

[info@staugustinescentrehalifax.org.uk](mailto:info@staugustinescentrehalifax.org.uk)

I'll spell out all of those:

So, the website: -s-t-a-u-g-u-s-t-i-n-e-s-c-e-n-t-r-e-h-a-l-i-f-a-x.org.uk

Org - that's : O-R-G.-U-K.

The email is: [englishforlifeintheUK@gmail.com](mailto:englishforlifeintheUK@gmail.com)  
And that's "English for" spelt: f-o-r - life in the uk.

And the general email - Info at:

info@ - is i-n-f-o (at), and then the same as the website address:

[staugustinescentrehalifax.org.uk](http://staugustinescentrehalifax.org.uk)

Thank you and be back with you again soon.

***Ends (36:16)***

---