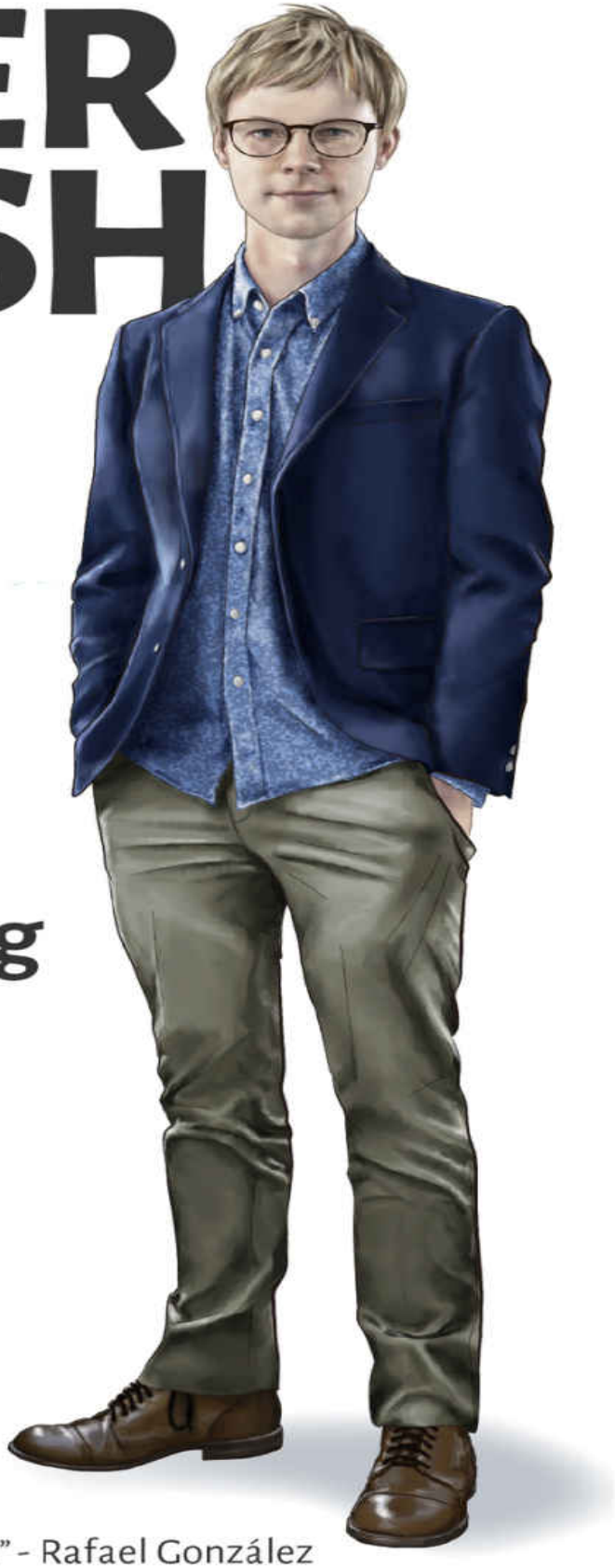
MASTER ENGLISH *Fast*



An Uncommon Guide to Speaking Extraordinary English.

Julian Northbrook

"I like Julian's punk-philosophy and pragmatism" - Rafael González

Master English *FAST*

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Speaking Extraordinary English

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For Yuuli

Preface

Welcome to Master English ***FAST***: An uncommon guide to speaking extraordinary English in international business.

Welcome to my extraordinary world.

I'm Julian Northbrook, and by making the effort to get this book in your hands you've taken the first step to mastering English. More about me in a moment.

First, a warning: If you don't really need English in your life, if you aren't motivated, or if you're lazy and you can't take tough advice, this book is not for you. Stop reading right now and go watch TV instead. Don't waste your time; I know I don't want to waste mine.

The methods I teach are extremely effective. But they may seem unconventional. For example, do you believe that the most important thing is to memorise more vocabulary words? That you must practise with native speakers to get good at English? Or that just listening can get you fluent? All of these common beliefs are wrong.

To benefit from this book, you must be willing to let go of your assumptions. If you're not willing to listen and you don't want to change your own (probably false) opinions, stop reading right now.

The way I teach requires hard work. There is no free lunch, as the saying goes – meaning that nothing comes without a price. If you want to master the English language, you must be willing to do the work. If you are lazy, if you are satisfied with half-assed efforts and mediocre results, stop reading right now.

As you have probably noticed by now, I am frank, outspoken, and don't care if I upset you by telling you the truth you need to hear. This book is for people who are tough, who can listen to criticism, who can get angry and then use that energy to work harder and harder.

You must be willing to look in the mirror and admit that you don't like what you see; you have to be willing to change your bad habits and make

difficult choices.

You have to sort out your priorities, recognise what's most important to you, and be willing to make the necessary sacrifices. If you are sensitive, if you get easily offended, if you tend to quit when the going gets tough, stop reading right now.

One more thing: I don't swear as often as some people I know, but I'm not afraid to use words like shit, fuck and even on occasion when it suits me, cunt. These words exist in the English language for a reason – they convey emotions that normal words can't. I have no intention of changing the way I speak for anybody – so if this offends you, just don't read this book.

All this said, here's my promise to you. If you are willing to let go of your assumptions, listen to my advice and do the bloody work, this book will get you speaking the extraordinary English you need in order to become the extraordinary person you know you can be.

Introduction

In the summer of 2007, I got on a plane bound for Tokyo, Japan. I had a job interview lined up for a great position at an art gallery in Harajuku, a fashionable part of Tokyo. I felt sure life was going to be awesome.

Only it wasn't.

I got turned down for the job.

Why? Because, quite simply, my Japanese was ***crap***. I was fully qualified and had everything the gallery needed – apart from the fact that I spoke Japanese like a two-year old with mental health problems.

From there I suffered three long, painful years feeling embarrassed about my poor language skills, feeling stupid every time I spoke, and frustrated as hell because I just didn't know what to do in order to improve.

Eventually I worked out what I was doing wrong and mastered the language (I'll share all of that, and more, with you in this book), but the journey there was a long, painful one.

The Day I Forgot Japanese Wasn't My First Language

I'll never forget the day I realised I'd done it. The day I realised I'd overcome my language problems and mastered Japanese.

At 10 am I stepped off the cool, air-conditioned coach into a hot and humid train station carpark. I was at a train station somewhere in Ibaraki, Japan – in the middle of nowhere.

The carpark was empty.

Looking towards the station I saw no trains – a very different sight to the station near my home in Tokyo, where trains go in and out every few seconds. I was doing research at a private secondary school in the area, and I'd gotten on a coach early that morning to get there. Someone was going to pick me up by car at 11 am, but by chance I'd caught an earlier bus and arrived almost an hour ahead of time.

Not too sure what to do, I looked around.

In the corner of the station carpark, there was a tiny wooden building. It looked like a garden shed, raised up on a platform. There were some steps leading up to the wooden platform where a small plastic table and two plastic chairs were set. Right next to the chairs there is a sign: “Ice Coffee – 150 yen”.

There was no point in standing around in the heat for an hour, so I climbed little wooden steps to get a coffee.

Was anyone even there, I wondered.

"Konnichiwa!" I called out.

The door opened, and a lady probably in her 50s came out.

She froze, stunned. I'm quite used to this in Japan. A lot of people get nervous around English speakers – a result of failing to learn any kind of practical English at school. And this is especially true in the countryside where you rarely see foreigners.

I pointed at the sign and asked for an iced coffee – in Japanese. She looked relieved. “You speak Japanese?" she asked.

“Just a little,” I replied. *“I’m still studying and not very good yet.”*

That was a lie – I’d already passed the highest level of the Japanese Proficiency exam, worked as a freelance translator and was currently the head teacher at a Japanese company dealing in business-to-business English programmes.

(Why I said “I’m not very good yet” will become evident later in this book.)

She got me my ice coffee, and motioned for me to sit at the little plastic table next to the door.

For a few seconds, we were both silent.

Then she started to talk.

Sitting in her shed all day, she apparently didn’t have much to do. So she killed time reading books and magazines. And she had *a lot* of interesting things to talk about. She told me all about the history of the area. Apparently, nearby was a shrine that had been established in 600 BC, and the town was also the birthplace of *Juri Takahashi*, one of the members of the girl-band AKB48.

Have you ever been so engaged in something that you completely forget everything around you? It's like the rest of the world disappears, and

time flows on without your noticing. It seemed like I'd only been there a few seconds when my phone rang.

"Hey, I'm here," said my friend with the car.

Actually, an entire hour had already passed!

Saying goodbye, I left the shed and ran over to my friend's car. I got in and said hello (in English). I said that I'd arrived early, but it was OK, because I had enjoyed having a coffee and a chat to the lady in the cafe.

This friend is someone I always speak English with, so it wasn't strange when he asked, *"Oh? She could speak English?"*

The realisation happened *right then.*

"Er… I'm not sure." I said.

What language had we been speaking? I couldn't remember. I'd been so absorbed in the conversation that I wasn't aware of what language we were speaking. Logically, I knew it must have been Japanese, but I'd been totally unconscious of the fact.

That's the moment I knew I'd made it. I'd forgotten that Japanese wasn't my first language. That is exactly the kind of moment I want to help you experience in English.

Welcome to the First Day of the Rest of Your Life

By opening this book you've made a life-changing decision. You're here with this book in your hands because your English skills hold you back and stop you being the person you want to be and living the life you want to live. I understand: *I've been there.*

This book is going to give you the quick 'n dirty lowdown on improving your English as a high-intermediate to advanced speaker.

Whether you're a freelancer, an artist, a translator or a writer, a business owner, a business man, an executive or you live in an English-speaking country, you feel frustrated by your English.

You know that improving your English skills will make your life better… but you don't know how to do it. Well, it's a mistake to think you can do the same things as you did when you were a beginner in English.

As soon as you hit the intermediate level, everything changed, including the things you need to do in order to improve.

Who Am I and Why Should You Listen to Me?

I’m Julian Northbrook, also known as The Language Punk (more on where I got that nickname in a moment).

As for why you should listen to me, I could tell you all about my extensive experience teaching English, about my Master’s degree in Applied Linguistics or my PhD research in second-language acquisition and the publications I have in academic journals. I *could* tell you all about those things, but I won’t, because nobody gives a shit. What I will tell you about though, is this – *the pain I experienced while learning my second language*.

You see, there are far, far too many language teachers in the world who have either never learned a second language themselves, or have never taken it past the low-intermediate stage.

Should you trust these people?

I say no. I wouldn’t. Just like I wouldn’t trust a music teacher who couldn’t play music, a hairdresser with dirty hair or a dentist with bad teeth.

In my opinion, the best way to measure a teacher’s ability to help you is not by the qualifications they can list, but rather by the number of hours they’ve spent struggling in a second language themselves. Well, I’ve spent *many* hours struggling.

Oh, why do people call me The Language Punk”?

One day, my friend and salon marketing genius Kat Smith offhandedly said, *“Julian you’re such a posh punk... a Language Punk!”* and the name stuck.

Why Your English Sucks

When I left my full-time teaching job in 2014, I went from standing up all day long teaching classes to sitting in front of the computer all day. But I didn't change my diet at all… on the contrary, because I was at home I started snacking all day, and drinking more in the evenings.

You can guess what happened next, right?

Yes, I got fat.

So I got a personal trainer – Phil (also known as 'Phil the cunt', for reasons that would be very clear if you ever worked with him). Well, when I started working with Phil, the last thing I wanted to do was diet and work out. I just wanted the results…*fast.*

Most people don't do anything until it's too painful not to – me included. When I started working with Phil, I did so because I'd gotten unhealthy and overweight. My stomach was hanging over my belt, and I had very little energy. I wanted results…*yesterday!*

We live in a world where everybody wants everything instantly, and without effort. A magic pill that makes them fluent in English. A button to push that magically makes them speak without making embarrassing mistakes.

I'll tell you now: just like there is no magic fitness fix, there is no instant method for mastering English, either.

This said, it only took me two months of dieting and working out with Phil to get back into shape, which is pretty damn fast.

The reason I tell you this is because the thing that made the biggest difference to me was the way Phil corrected me on some false beliefs.

That's what we're going to start with in this book.

There is no quick, instant method to master English. It's always going to take dedication and hard work. But there is one thing you can do right now to begin improving faster – *fix your mindset.*

My friend Hitomi Horiguchi (a life-coach I know in Tokyo) very rightly says, *"If you fix your mindset, then your actions will also change."*

Very true words.

Here's a great example. Airi, one of my students said:

> *'Today I made a mistake speaking English. Although I wanted to say "I forgot to bring it", I said "I forgot bringing it." As soon as I said this, I noticed that I made a mistake. But the conversation flowed and I couldn't take it back. I felt embarrassed after the conversation, but just remembered what Julian said in 'Fearless Fluency': "Embarrassment doesn't exist," and I learned something from this experience.*

Fearless Fluency is another book that I wrote, but the point is still exactly the same for this one: *the way you think defines the way you act.*

When you make a mistake, it's easy to feel bad about it. But if you understand that mistakes are a part of the learning process – everything changes.

There are lots of reasons why your English might not improve…but in 90% of cases, it comes down to a few very common problems. Most of them are to do with your mindset – the way you think about improving your English.

Reason 1: You Think You Can't Master English

Here's a dirty little secret: *I failed French when I was a student.*

You probably studied English at school, but being British, I studied French. And I *hated* those classes. It was all boring grammar exercises, copying from the textbook and translating sentences. I couldn't see any way that learning French was going to improve my life, and I didn't care whether I got good grades. But then years later I had a chance to live in Switzerland for three months, all expenses paid. I turned it down because I wasn't confident enough to go to a French-speaking country. Suddenly, I could see how French might improve my life, but there was still one big problem: I didn't believe I *could* learn French!

Years after that I struggled with Japanese and believed it was because I wasn't talented at languages. Again, I had "the Why" – I had a real reason to learn Japanese, but I believed I couldn't do it.

"Whether you think you can or you can't, you're right" famously said Henry Ford. Whether you find a solution to your problems and do what it takes is largely defined by your attitude.

If I asked you, *"Can you fly?"* you'd probably say "no". But that's short-sighted and rather uncreative.

Imagine if the Wright brothers had done the same thing:

"Hey, Wright, can you fly?" I ask.

"Fly? No! Of course I can't – people can't fly!" they respond.

Suddenly mankind never develops airplanes, and we're still travelling in boats or horse-drawn carriages. You can fly. We all can.

Reason 2: You Believe Only Children Can Get Good at Languages

I once taught private lessons to a Japanese guy in his 90s. He learned *fast*. His mind was sharp as a razor, and he had energy that would put a 20-year-old to shame. He had a wicked sense of humour too – his jokes were dirty and made even me blush.

On the other hand, I know someone who is a great person, but severely limits herself with some rather bizarre beliefs about language learning.

She believes only kids can get good at languages and therefore it's impossible for her to get good at Japanese (she's from the UK, so English is her first language). She started, found it difficult, then blamed the fact she's already an adult.

"It's not my fault," she said. *"I'm just too old. If only I'd been exposed to Japanese as a kid!"*

This kind of thinking is stupid…and dangerous.

I started learning Japanese when I was 24, and now, at the age of 33, I speak it damn well.

Reason 3: You Believe That You Have to Go to an English-Speaking Country and Be Surrounded by Native Speakers

"I've lived in the UK 11 years, but my English just won't improve!" That's what Penny said to me several years ago during our very first coaching session. She'd lived in the UK for 11 years, and her husband is British. She said she could understand her family in English fine, but at

work things were really hard. She couldn’t join conversations with co-workers and didn’t understand the jokes they made. To make it worse, people wouldn’t understand what she was saying. People kept asking: *“Could you say that again?”* and she felt her face going bright red every time.

Penny said her pronunciation was bad, that she made mistakes in English and that what she did say never sounded natural. She ended up feeling embarrassed every time she opened her mouth. In a nutshell, her work life had become torture for her.

When she told me this, I asked her what she was doing to improve her English. The answer was shocking, but surprisingly very, very common.

Nothing.

Like many people, Penny believed that just being in an English-speaking environment would be enough to get good at the language. Indeed, that is *why* she went to the UK – to just “pick up” English in a "natural" environment without having to study.

Big, big mistake.

I've surveyed, interviewed and worked with thousands of people, and something which comes up again and again is that people hold themselves back with false beliefs about what’s called "natural" learning.

There has been a ton of research done on natural learning methods that claim you can learn through lots of listening and just being in an English environment. *The results are not great.*

In his book, *“A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning,”* Peter Skehan talks about what’s called “immersion” schooling, and how students generally become very good at listening to English…but *not* very good at speaking.

The belief that being in an English-speaking environment, or that you can learn just by listening, persists because people *want* to believe it – not because it’s actually true. Many people like Penny go to live in an English-speaking country and expect that to be enough. They believe they can improve by doing nothing. So they get nothing.

One of my *EES* members was telling us how he lived in the UK for five years, but didn't improve all. He didn’t start to improve until he started thinking about what he really wanted, and consciously and actively started to apply what he'd learned from me.

Hanako, another *EES* member, now a coaching client, lives in the US and said basically the same thing. It's a very, very common experience.

Reason 4: You Believe You Can Listen Your Way to Fluency

The human brain is fucking lazy.

Really, really, *really* fucking lazy.

This is for a very good reason. Energy and computational power are both limited resources…and so the more the brain can save, the better.

For the most part, this is a very, very good thing. Scientists estimate the brain processes around 11 million bits of information per second – but the conscious mind can only process around 200. Working memory—like your brain's RAM—can only hold between 4 and 7 items at a time.

If your idea of learning is just passively watching crap on YouTube, watching TV or listening to the radio without paying much attention to the language…well, your brain is going assume it's not important.

The more you can do to make your brain work, the better. So for example, watching a film in English without subtitles is much better than watching a film with subtitles in your native language (which is a total waste of time for learning). In the same way, watching a film while using exercises and techniques that force you to focus and be *active* will be much, much better than just watching.

I'll give you these kinds of exercises later in this book. But for now, let me give you another example just to really drive home the point.

Have you ever done any kind of muscle training?

Building muscle and improving fluency in a language is very, very similar. You do an exercise that's designed to stimulate your muscle and make it grow. Now, I'm not that strong, and I'm a total beginner. So for something like a bench press I only need about 25 kg. My friend and mentor Jon, on the other hand, has been doing it for years and needs 100 kg.

You build muscle by forcing it to work beyond its current ability. You're literally tearing the muscle so that it will grow back bigger and stronger.

Now imagine Jon doing bench presses with my 25 kg. How much do you think that is going to help him build muscle?

Nothing.

My weights are far, far too light for Jon.

I'm a beginner – he is advanced.

This is exactly the same for your English – as a beginner you probably improved quite fast, because *everything* was difficult and intense. Just trying to understand a film in English was a very hard, active process. But the better you get, the more intensity you need to keep improving.

For you, at your level, passively watching videos on YouTube or listening to English is like Jon lifting my 25 kg weights.

When you study and practise English, you should feel like someone who has just lifted 100 kg – absolutely exhausted.

Reason 5: You Don't Have Native Speakers to Practise with and You Think That's a Problem

In 2009, the English learning industry in Japan was estimated to generate 670 billion yen – about six billion dollars.

English education is one of Japan's most profitable industries. But how many people in Japan speak English at a level that matches their investment?

Almost none.

Sure, there are people who are good at English. A few are *really* good. But they are exceptional people – and there certainly aren't as many of them as there are people spending money on English.

Right away this suggests that if you want to become an extraordinary speaker, it's not enough to study English in the same way as everybody else.

The way most English schools teach English really isn't that good. You see, the schools are far more interested in making a profit than they are in good teaching. And you can't really blame them – they are businesses first and foremost.

They tell you things like: *"You learned grammar in school…now to get fluent, all you need to do is practise with a native speaker!"* It sounds great, and people buy into it. But if you think about it, why do these schools advocate this method? It's not because it's effective; it's because it allows them to hire unqualified teachers who just chat to people for low pay.

Yes, chatting with native speakers will help with your fluency – it is a form of practise, after all. But it's not very effective, and what helps you improve is nothing to do with the fact you're speaking to a native speaker.

We'll talk about what really *is* important for building fluency later, in Chapter 10.

Reason 6: You Need to Be Perfect before You Start Doing Anything

This is a question I got in my email a few years ago: *"Will I ever manage to be fluent enough to move from France to a new job in the United Kingdom?"*

Sadly, the answer to this question is probably *no.*

Not because it's not possible, but because we human beings are never perfectly prepared for anything. Good enough is good enough. You've got to just do it, and worry about the details later.

A good—and very honest—analogy for this is having children.

My first son, Yuuli, is 9 this year. Even the mathematically challenged will quickly see that I must have been pretty damn young when he was born. I was 24 when he was born, 23 when my wife (then girlfriend) got pregnant. We were planning to get married anyway; we weren't that careful, and before we knew it we had a choice to make: Have the baby or get an abortion.

I'm not against abortion, but I'm also not deluded into thinking the time has to be "right." We both wanted kids anyway, so it was an easy choice for us to make.

If everybody waited until conditions were perfect before having kids, the human race would be long extinct. There is always some reason to wait until later.

Were there times when I felt jealous of my friends out drinking and partying while I was stuck at home changing dirty nappies? Sure. Does it matter? No.

It's the same with English.

You can always learn a little more, get a little better. But what this means is there's no point in waiting.

Perhaps you want to work in an international company, or you want to live and work overseas – now is the time to do it. No matter how crap you think your English is, it doesn't matter. JFDI.

Reason 7: You Believe You Don't Have Time

“I don’t have time to improve my English!”

Bullshit.

Trust me, you have time.

There is not one of us in this world who has less time than we need. Ultimately every one of us has 24 hours in a day, which is 1440 minutes, or 86400 seconds. And in that time most of us do very little, while a few people get incredible amounts of stuff done.

Time is never the problem. It’s always about how you use your time. One *EES* member said he didn't join for several months because he knew he wouldn't have time. He was too busy with his job. But here's the thing – his job was all in English. He was always busy because he was constantly fighting fires. Nothing got done ahead of time, and he was always panicking to finish things last minute.

Then one day he realised that he wasn't getting anything done because his bad English kept slowing him down. Reading, writing and replying emails took far, far too long. He'd misunderstand something in a meeting and waste time trying to fix it later. He'd struggle to communicate things to others – which would waste even more time.

Clearly then, the best for him was to stop everything he was doing, improve his English…then save *a lot* of time later.

Start with Why

According to linguist David Crystal, around 1 billion people speak English, and about 2/3 of these speak English as a second language. That's right – far more people speak English as a second language than as a first language.

This makes English a damn useful language to master. In fact, these days English is pretty much essential for international business. Will that change in the future? Maybe, but not any time soon.

This does, however, also mean you've got a lot of competition.

Speaking Japanese at a high level is a huge advantage for me simply because very few people can do it (even among people living in Japan).

Not so with English.

English is a little bit like getting a PhD. It's a very difficult thing to do, and it looks big and impressive to people who are not part of the world of academia.

However, the reality is that if you want an academic career, getting the PhD is simply the first step. It's the key which opens the door…but once you've opened the door, you're just one among many other people who have the same key as you. Simply put, in academia everybody has a PhD – so it's no advantage at all.

Same with English skills.

Just getting good at English may open some doors for you, but it's not enough to give you a real advantage.

For that…you have to be *extraordinary*.

One of my members, Bobby, told me he was struggling to stand out in his work place. He was part of the sales team in a Hong Kong-based tech company, and most deals were made with overseas companies.

Bobby spoke English well – but no matter how hard he tried, he was always pushed back into the shadows by another sales rep who spoke much, much better English. Bobby told me about a time when he met a group of

Japanese clients at the airport, and one of them said to the super-star English speaker, *"Your English is so good! I thought you were born in an English-speaking country!"*

Every time Bobby spoke, the clients would speak to his colleague instead. Whenever the clients had a question, they asked the colleague – even when Bobby was the expert in that area.

I'm sure you can imagine how frustrating this was.

Another member, Hanako, told me about a friend who always seems to be ahead of her. They both went to live in the US at the same time and both started working at the same place. But the friend was much better at English and was quickly promoted from an assistant position to a full position. Then after just two years she was promoted again to a job with more responsibility and a higher salary. Hanako, however, lagged behind, always in her friend's shadow.

It's Dog-Eat-Dog out There

Of the billion people in the world who speak English, some of them will be your friends, colleagues and clients – people who help you in life. But the vast majority will be your competitors.

It's a dog-eat-dog world out there.

You are swimming in a sea of competition and just having English is not enough anymore. Ultimately, the person who speaks best *wins*. And I want you to be that person.

So how do you become the person who speaks best?

First and foremost, you need to be clear about your "Why?" What is it that you want to achieve in English? Nobody wants to get good at English just for the hell of it. We all have a need deep down: we want to be respected in our workplace or by our friends and family. We want to make more money and live easier. Or we simply want to make it through the day without feeling embarrassed in front of our co-workers. Regardless, it all starts here with your Why.

Imagine this situation: two rowing teams are racing to London.

The first team consists of two normal guys in the oldest, worst piece of junk you can imagine. Their boat is falling to bits. There are holes in it. Water is coming in. They're paddling down the River Thames at just 10 feet a day.

Then you have their competition: they're Olympic rowers. They're in a state-of-the-art kayak and they've got super expensive equipment.

Who is going to get to London first?

You might think it would be the Olympians, because they're the ones with speed, strength and the best equipment. But what I didn't tell you is this: *They are paddling up the river going the wrong way.*

The guys in the super expensive kayak are paddling like crazy, going full force from morning until night. But they never stopped to ask themselves: *"Are we going in the right direction?"*

It sounds so obvious. But I see English learners do this all the time. They say they want to get fluent. They want to be like a 'native speaker'. But they've never stopped to ask themselves, *"Is what I'm doing now taking me in the right direction?"*

For my PhD research, I did a series or research projects in Japanese secondary schools. First I analysed the textbooks and teaching materials they use, then I tested them in a laboratory to see how fluent they were in the language.

Guess what? They were very fluent: the students had successfully acquired all the language in their textbooks, and they processed it just like a native speaker would – automatically and without consciously thinking about it. But here's the thing: the language in their textbooks is totally different to the language people actually use in the real world. So although these students were getting fluent…they were getting fluent in something totally useless.

The YouTube Problem

This is a slight digression, but YouTube can be really bad this for exactly the same reason. On the surface, it seems like great thing. You have access to all these English lessons – for free. But this is dangerous for two reasons.

First, the way YouTube works, people make money by displaying ads on videos. The more that video gets watched, the more money they make. So if you want to start a YouTube channel, you find out what people are searching for – then make a video based on that.

The problem with this is that most people have no idea what they really need to get good at English. So the most popular videos aren't

necessarily the most helpful ones. The other problem is that in general the quality of content is extremely low.

These days, everybody and their cat teaches English online, and many of them have no genuine qualifications. They're people who have no idea about learning language, have never mastered a second language themselves, or ever even tried. But with the promise of money from displaying ads on their videos…the temptation is so high. So they claim to teach you English. Talk about the blind leading the blind.

For example, something many people are searching for is *"most common phrases in English."*

If you type this into YouTube, you'll get loads of videos teaching you the most common phrases in English…but actually, *they're not.* Because the people who make these videos have no idea what the most common phrases are.

There's one video called "500 Most Common English Phrases". Right at number 2 you get "I am the youngest in my family".

To me, this doesn't sound like one of the most common English phrases. But to be sure, I checked it out. How many times does this phrase occur in a data bank of British English?

Zero.

So how about American English?

Still zero.

So how about in a data bank of 51 million words of English from film subtitles? Surely it must be in there? But no, it's not.

These three data banks combined make up about 1 billion words of English data. *"I am the youngest in my family"* isn't in any of them. But according to this particular English-learning video, it's one of the 500 most common phrases.

Bullshit.

Other favourites from that video are: *"He is a grocery"* (which doesn't even make any sense) and *"Who do you pay your rent to?"*

The point is, people will always abuse anything they can make money from. Which, to be frank, is a sad, sad way to approach life.

Of course, this problem goes far beyond YouTube. The chances are you're wasting more than 80% for your time and energy learning language that you simply don't need. People who master English FAST (or at all) are

focused, and they concentrate their time and energy on things that are really going to be useful to them.

We talk about this in detail in the next chapter, but the point I want to make here is that it makes a big difference what materials you study. The language you need will be different to the language someone else needs. It all depends on what you want to do with English; it depends on what your goals are – on your Why.

But whatever your goals are, the material you study should be real language (something actually written or said by native speakers) or "native-like" (similar to or better than real language). The materials I offer in my membership programme (Julian Northbrook's League of Extraordinary English Speakers) are what I would call "optimised real". The stories and conversations we study are actually scripted from real conversations – but they have been optimised to include as many high-frequency 'chunks' of language as possible (we'll talk about this in detail in Chapter 6)

Why Are You Here?

In his book and TED talks presentation, Simon Sinek urges business owners to *start with why*.

"People don't buy what you do, they buy why you do it," he says.

Sinek gives the example of Apple computer – why are they consistently more innovative and more successful than their competitors? After all, Apple is just a computer company. But other computer manufacturers are busy trying to tell you what they do (make computers) and how they do it (it's got lots of RAM and a big hard drive), and that is boring and uninspiring.

Apple, on the other hand, tells you ***why*** they do what they do: Apple wants to challenge the status quo and change the world through better design. Apple aims to change people's lives; they just happen to do this by making computers

Incidentally, I'm an Apple user, and the thought of buying (or even using) a Windows computer makes me sick. You could say I am well and truly sold on Apple's "Why".

Now, you'd do well to take Sinek's advice when thinking about your own work and business, but also know this: *exactly the same is true of your English, too.*

This book is written for people who need English in their business, work and lives. Whatever it is that you do, you need to get clear on *why* you do it. English itself is just a tool – something you use in your life to achieve your goals. Your first step should be to answer the question: "What do you want *to do* with English?"

I work with a wide range of people including artists, photographers, IT professionals, doctors, teachers, fashion designers, marketing consultants, salesmen and business owners, business executives, directors and a whole lot more. All of them are people who have already reached a fairly high level of English, but they suffer from the same problem: *their English holds them back and stops them from being what they could—and* should*—be*. Their business suffers because of their English, and inside, they suffer too. In a nutshell, they are people who are painfully aware of the fact they're speaking in a second language.

It's easy to get stuck and overwhelmed at this stage. After all, there is so much English out there to learn. How do you cut through it all? How do you figure out what you need to do?

It all starts with your *Why*.

One of my coaching clients told me she was worried about joining a big conference at her company. She didn't think her English was good enough for it. With a little help from me (and a lot of hard work on her part), she performed brilliantly, moved to a different position (for considerably more money) and then started her own business. She was able to do this because she was very clear about what she wanted to achieve with her English.

Another of my EES members—a freelance artist—was literally told to *"go away and come back when you can speak English"* by an editor at an art conference. She had travelled halfway around the world just to meet that editor. Of course this was very painful, but it also gave her the motivation to work hard on improving her English. And she has a clear goal that she wants to achieve: her *Why* is taking her artwork out into the world.

Yet another EES member needed to teach classes at his school in English. The first time he taught a class, his students laughed at him because his accent was thick and they were better at English. For him, his *Why* was becoming the leader he needed to be for his students.

Another student of mine found himself in a similar position in his company. He was a senior level executive, and he needed to be a strong

leader. But he felt embarrassed speaking English around his subordinates because they were much better at English. Same *Why*, different situation.

My goal is to help you forget that English isn't your first language so you can get on with doing whatever it is you do best, without English getting in the way. But I can only do that if you are clear about your *Why*.

A Final Note on Goals

Earl Nightingale says there are two kinds of people: goal-driven people and what he calls "river people."

Goal-driven people are driven by big, impressive goals – things that might take a lifetime to achieve. River people on the other hand, have no big goal: they are just hopping from one rock to the next in the great river of life.

I'm a river person.

I have many small goals…but no single "big" goal. I like to do things in a very flexible way, and I change direction fast and often. Now, you're probably thinking that this completely contradicts everything I said above. But what you have to understand is that your *Why* and your "goals" are not necessarily the same thing.

You see, being a "river" person doesn't mean that you work randomly.

Just this morning I was talking with a new client. She's at around the low-intermediate level, and wants to get better at speaking English.

She's clever and motivated, so she'll do fine. But the first thing I noticed is that her *Why* was rather vague – especially concerning English.

She had goals and things she wanted to do, but she wasn't really very clear on them, or why English would be important for her.

This is a problem, because the brain needs context in order to remember the language you use.

When you hear new phrases and expressions, you need to connect them to a situation, otherwise they'll just be forgotten. For example, say you dream of becoming a professional photographer, and you have a clear goal of taking photographs and displaying them in exhibitions all over the world, speaking in English with gallery owners and art-lovers. Well, suddenly all the English you learn has far more meaning, because you have a clear vision of the situations in which you want to use it. You hear someone say something like, "Good afternoon!" and you imagine yourself

right there, at that exhibition, saying “Good afternoon!” to someone who’s just walked through the door.

This is very, very powerful.

We’re going to talk more about learning the language later, but understand right here, right now, that the stronger your *Why*, the faster you will improve. It will guide you, focus you, and give you something very concrete to work towards.

Think long and hard about the things you want to do in life. Your goals might change (mine often do), and that’s fine. What’s important is that you can imagine yourself doing things in English.

Language and Language Learning 101

When I did my master's degree, I'd been struggling with Japanese for a long time. But very quickly I realised that the reason I had been struggling was because I was *thinking* about language in totally the wrong way.

Remember what I said in the Chapter 1? Your mindset is everything. If the way you think about language and language learning is wrong, you won't take the correct actions.

What Even Is Language?

You'd think this would be an easy question to answer. But it's not – far from it. And for me, at least, the definition of *language* provided by language scientists (also sometimes called "psycholinguists") is unsatisfactory. So, after giving you this definition, I'll give you my own.

My definition of language might sound a bit *weird*. I was an artist long before I got into the world of second-language acquisition, and I primarily think in metaphors. And that's exactly what the definition I will give you is – a metaphor.

But first, here's the official definition. In the 1960s, Charles F. Hockett came up with a set of features that characterise human language. We say "human language", because although animals do have language, it's clearly not the same as human language. Animals can speak (some better than others) but none can do what human beings can do. Indeed, our ability to use language is what separates us as a species.

Originally, Hockett's list had 13 features, but arguably some aren't necessary for language. Speaking and listening are a great example – sign language does a pretty good job of being "language" without speaking or listening. So clearly they aren't necessary. Here I'm just including the features that are necessary.

First, a language must communicate meaning. Often that is by speaking and writing, but it doesn't have to be – I can communicate "hello" with a smile and a wave just as easily as I can by saying the word, for example.

Second, the language itself is arbitrary. What we mean by this is the words themselves are just symbols. The words "rock" and "ishi" (Japanese) both stand for the same thing – it's just that the word is different. But neither word is better than the other. The word "rock" isn't more descriptive than "ishi". They're just different. And totally arbitrary. We could choose to call a rock a "bligbopper" if we wanted, and it would be just as good.

The sounds of language must fit into district categories, or, to put it simply, a language has a limited number of sounds. The number is different between languages: English has about 40 phonemes (basic sounds), Japanese has about 46, some languages have a lot more, some a lot less. But the number of sounds we produce has to be limited.

Language must be able to communicate events which are happening away from the speaker in terms of time and location. This is one of the main things that separates us from other animals. Monkeys, for example, communicate information about predators using distinct sounds. But they only do it when the predator is *present* – they can't talk about a predator that was there, or one that a friend saw. Humans can.

Finally, languages are "generative" in that a limited number of units, whether words, rules, chunks, phrases or expressions, can be used to create an infinite number of sentences.

Now, this is a start. It does a great job of describing the features of language. But if you ask me, it doesn't get to the ***heart*** of the question. While it's great to know what the features are, just like it's helpful to know roses are red and grass is green (unless you're colour-blind…), I still don't really know *what* language is. And herein lies my criticism of academia.

Science has to be exact, precise and objective. But by doing so, it often sacrifices usefulness.

Everything in this book is based on hard science and research, much of which has been done by me. But it's also based on experience teaching and learning – and that, often, is far more useful than what science can tell us. I mention this right here, right now, because a lot of people will tell you that their methods are "based on science" – but really, what does that mean? Even if this is true, it may not be very helpful to you.

So let me give you my personal definition of what language is. As I warned you before, it's a little weird. But bear with me.

"The Beast"

One of my favourite places in the world is Shinjuku station. It is certainly not the biggest station in the world, but it is the busiest. In 2007, it was estimated that each and every day more than 4 million people pass through the train station. That number certainly hasn't gone down over the years.

The reason it is so busy is because it acts as the hub station for everyone coming in and out of Tokyo, as well as for a lot of people going around Tokyo. But Shinjuku station is not simply a building in the middle of the city.

It's alive – a gigantic beast that heaves, groans and pulsates with the flow of human traffic. A massive heart that keeps people flowing around the city like blood through veins. Put simply, it's people who give Shinjuku station life.

No one comes to the station because they love the station. The destination is never the station. It's never about wanting to use the station to get somewhere. *It's all about the destination.*

People pass through the station because it's the fastest, most efficient way to get to where they want to go. So in many ways it's similar to language.

The actual words and grammar are meaningless. What matters is the *destination* – whether what you're doing gets you to the place you want to go.

We use language to exchange information, bond socially, express emotion, play, and even organise our thoughts. But it goes deeper than that, much deeper. We need to think about why we even have language in the first place. If I ask you, *"What is a pen?"* you'd probably tell me that it's a tool for writing. And therein lies the problem – language is a tool, but unlike a pen, it's quite hard to define what we actually do with it.

Go back to the image of a train station.

People channelled, streaming through tunnels en route to their destination. Like electricity running through the power grid, water through

pipes. A giant network. That network is humanity. *Life*. An entity that is at once a single, living being and simultaneously a collection of smaller parts.

You are a part of that network.

We're all born with a cable and a plug that connects directly to a socket in that human network.

Go ahead. Plug it in.

Congratulations!

You've just connected with the rest of the human race. Language is that cable. It's a 255 terabits per second fibre-optic super-cable, capable of transmitting the entire human experience from person to person in the blink of an eye.

Emotion. Information. Pain. Sorrow. Love. Hate. Indifference. Recognition. Denial. Education and ignorance.

Language has the power to teach, the power to confuse and the power to overwhelm.

If you don't believe me, think back to the first time the love of your life whispered *'I love you'* in your ear and the time she told you, *'It's over… I met someone else'*.

People are so concerned with words, grammar, phrasal verbs and idioms. But these things are meaningless by themselves. Those things are just components of the cable – the raw materials it's made from. But they are not the reason you need the cable, neither are they the cable itself.

You will realise I'm talking in metaphors here. But in my experience the biggest breakthroughs come from understanding this simple point – speaking English is not a goal, *it's a tool you can use to achieve a goal*.

You need a *Why*—a goal—that is greater than English itself. So if you didn't take the time to get clear on your *Why*, stop here, and go back to the previous chapter.

What Is Language Learning?

You probably studied English at school. Or at least something that resembles English (remember what I said in Chapter 2 about the research I did on secondary school English).

If the English you studied at school was anything like the way I studied French, you were taught English as an *academic* subject. By "academic" subject, I mean something that you studied in much the same

way as mathematics, science or history. Memorising facts, random words, random grammar points. And then we're expected to perform well on tests.

Unfortunately, though, this is a pretty crap way to go about learning a language.

You also had subjects like sport, music and art.

Guess what?

English is like sport, music and art – but *not* like math or history. It's something that you have to do and experience and feel – not just with your mind, but with your physical body.

Have you ever sailed a yacht before?

I haven't.

It wouldn't matter how many books I read about sailing – if I got on a yacht now and took it out to sea I would die. No two ways about it. *I'd sink the damn thing and drown.* If you were stupid enough to get in the bloody thing with me, you'd die too.

See, I have no idea how to sail. And theory is not enough. Knowing that the yacht moves forward when wind blows into its sails isn't go to help me much when I'm racing full speed towards a cliff. It's something that you have to do and experience to get good at – preferably in a safe environment, with someone who knows what they're doing and can guide you (This is the logic behind the EES Community by the way – it's a safe place for members to screw up their English in.)

The key to getting better at speaking a language, then, is *experience*. The more you do, the better you get.

Experience drives learning.

I suggest you write that down and stick it to your computer monitor or something. Perhaps tattoo it on your forehead so you see it every time you look in the mirror (and if you look in the mirror as often as I do, you'll be seeing it a lot).

It's the things that we do in the language that promote acquisition of the language. It's what we *do* that makes us learn and get good at the language.

On the surface, this seems simple – experience drives learning. But as is often the case, the devil is in the details.

You see, experience is experience.

There is no real difference between positive experiences and negative experiences. They both provide feedback and learning opportunities to

some degree. Normally, though, a *negative* experience is a far more powerful learning opportunity simply because the fact that you've screwed up means there's something to learn from.

Also, "experience" with language does not mean only speaking. Speaking is simply one part of English. The deepest kind of learning comes not from just speaking, or just listening, but from understanding the language-learning process in a *holistic* way.

Holistic Learning

One of the best films I've seen in the last few years is "*Slumdog Millionaire"* from 2008. Visually, the film is absolutely stunning. If you're into cinematography like I am, definitely watch it.

The story follows 18-year-old Jamal Malik, an Indian Muslim from the slum. He ends up on the game show "Who wants to be a millionaire?", and at the beginning the host laughs at him. *A boy from the slum? He doesn't stand a chance!* But Malik knows the answers to all the questions… and as he progresses, the host gets more and more worried that he might actually win.

The show times out before the final question, and the host has Malik arrested – he must be cheating, he thinks. So Jamal Malik ends up in a prison cell, being interrogated by the police. How did he cheat? Where did he get the answers from? Again, the assumption is that a kid from the slum who's never been to school could never get the answers right.

It all turns out to be pure luck, though. Malik had a hard life, and experienced many things – some good, but most terrible. For example, one question asks: "In depictions of God Rama, he is famously holding what in his right hand?"

All of a sudden, Malik remembers his childhood. Some Hindus attacked the slum and killed his mother. Malik and his brother ran away… and as they did, they encountered a Hindu child dressed as the God Rama. The image is burned into his memory like a photograph – a child painted blue, left hand held in the air, and the right hand clutching a bow and arrow. How could Malik *not* get the question right?

The film progresses, and by pure chance each question corresponds with an experience Malik had in his life. So although he didn't go to school, had no education and never studied…he knew all the answers.

Obviously, this is a story, but it perfectly demonstrates the concept of holistic learning. It's learning from experience in the real world, and putting together all the knowledge you have to form a strong *whole*. (The adjective 'holistic' comes from the word 'whole' – even though you can't see it from the way they're spelt.)

Think of a car. Viewed in one way, a car is also a pile of car parts. Really, the pile of car parts and the car are the same thing. Physically, at least, there is no difference between them. But obviously the parts scattered all over the floor and the assembled car are not the same thing.

Knowledge is the same. It's learned in parts, but becomes something totally different when it is assembled. Holistic learning looks at the car – not the parts. It looks at the whole, not the individual components.

In a moment we'll talk about the three things you need to speak English well – something I call the "LKC Triangle", and you will see that language is only one component of the car. You also need other things to speak English well.

Language is far, far more than a set of words, phrases and grammar patterns. Those things are only components of the car – just like we talked about above, when I discussed the question "What is language?" You need to look beyond that. Focus not on the car parts, but on the *whole car* when it's assembled properly and ready to go somewhere.

Only when you start to do this does the next question become obvious: *What kind of car do you want?*

Do you want a flashy sports car, a classic, something practical? Perhaps you want a Rolls Royce? How about a Jaguar?

Each of these is a type of car. But there's a massive difference between a Ferrari and my dad's battered old Ford.

You see, depending on what you want to do with your English – your *Why* – the dream "car" that *you* want is going to be quite different to the car someone else wants. And so are the parts that go into it. Do you see now why I was so insistent on your thinking about your *Why*? The things you want to do? The things you want to achieve in life?

Your *Why* might change over time – just like someone might decide to trade in their Ferrari in favour of a Jaguar – and some days you'll need a different type of English to others (just like you might drive your Ford to the supermarket, but the Benz to a fancy party).

Good communication comes from thinking about English holistically – as a whole.

Most people spend far, far too much time worrying about insignificant things like whether they picked the right word or whether a certain phrase is better than another. Yes, those things are important. But they're only a single part of the equation.

Now the question is: *How does this apply to you and your English learning?*

The Three Things You Need to Speak English Well

In order to speak a language really well, you need three things. I call this the "LKC Triangle".

You need the L, which is *Language.*

This much is obvious: if you don't have the words and phrases that you need to express the things you want to say…clearly you're not going to be able to say them. But although learning the language itself is important, by itself language isn't enough.

You also need the "K" of the LKC Triangle – background *Knowledge*.

If you have no knowledge or understanding of a given topic, you're not going to be able to talk about it well (or even at all). If you asked me to talk about electrical engineering, I wouldn't be able to. I haven't got a clue about electrical engineering. I'm not even completely sure what electrical engineering is, other than that it's related to electricity…and probably engineering. I couldn't talk about it in English, Japanese, or Chinese; I couldn't talk about it in *any* language, even a language I know really well. Because I don't have the background knowledge.

There's one more thing you need. C for *Culture.*

This is easily the most complicated part of the LKC Triangle, and the most difficult to do well. Put simply, culture is like a pair of glasses that we see the world through.

Put on a pair of pink-tinted glasses, and you'll see the world in pink. Change them for a blue-tinted pair, and the world looks different.

Culture is the filter through which you see everything. When you say something in English, you say it with your own cultural understanding. But what I hear and understand you to be saying may be totally different,

because I understand things with *my* own cultural values. The more different our cultures are, the larger the gap will be.

We're going to talk about this in a lot of detail in this book because culture is really, really complicated. And it has many, many levels.

Humans have a culture that is distinct from other animals. If aliens ever visit us, they'll have a culture that is very different to ours too. We can also say that countries in one region of the world (for example, Asia) tend to have cultures that are relatively similar to each other when compared to some country in another region (for example, Africa).

We can also say that countries have cultures that are quite different. Even though it's true that the cultures in Japan and South Korea are similar if you compare either of them with the United States, the culture in Japan and South Korea are actually quite different compared to each other.

We can take this even further, because we can also say that cities inside one country have different cultures. The culture in Manchester is a bit different to the culture in London, which is different again to the culture in Exeter, or any other city in the United Kingdom.

We can also say that individuals have a culture as well. The way that I think is not the same as the way you think, which isn't the same as the way a third person thinks – even if we all live in the same city in the same country. We all have our own experience. And our experiences affect what we understand and the way we view the world.

Now, at this point you may be worried.

You came here thinking you had to learn English (which is enough by itself), but now I'm telling you that you've got lots of other stuff to learn, too.

Don't worry!

We'll cover all this stuff in detail, but I'll also explain how you can learn what you need as quickly and effectively as possible.

Pronunciation and Accent 101

What accent should you learn?

This is a tough question to answer, and a rather contentious topic. Accent is something that everybody has an opinion on…but something that very few people truly understand.

My (rather unpopular) answer to the question is: it doesn't matter. Or rather, your own accent is fine – as long as you sound clear and easy to understand.

I was once told a story about a Chinese guy living and working in Australia, who was having a rather hard time. He was a very high English level, and he'd spent a lot of time having accent and elocution training. He sounded exactly like a member of the British royalty with his crisp, Received Pronunciation accent (known as “RP” for short).

Lots of people want this. But actually this was the source of his problem. Believe it or not, people in Australia found him really uncomfortable to talk to. Here's this Chinese guy, in Australia, speaking with a posh British accent.

It's actually a very, very good thing if you speak with you own accent. If you are Chinese and you have a Chinese accent, that identifies you as a Chinese person. It communicates a lot about who you are, where you come from, and your cultural identity and values. But if you hide that accent, you hide your identity. And other people can feel that you’re not being true to yourself…and that makes them uncomfortable.

Not only that, but Received Pronunciation is an accent that isn't very common anymore, and it’s associated with distinctions between the upper and lower classes. Upper Received Pronunciation is associated with the English aristocracy and schools such as Eton and Oxford. Someone who speaks this way can be perceived negatively – like someone who thinks they’re better than other people.

The researcher Peter Trudgill estimated in 1974 that only 3% of people in Britain were actually RP speakers – and this percentage has likely decreased.

Yet another problem with speaking in a perfect native speaker accent is that it sets people's expectations very high. Many people find that when they first speak, people assume they are native speakers. This might seem like a good thing, but it creates a lot of pressure to speak perfectly. If I hear you speak and you sound Italian, I think, "Here's an Italian guy." If later on you make a mistake with your English, I don't think anything of it. It's just natural. But if I thought you were a British native speaker? Well, any mistakes you make are going to *really* stand out.

Speaking with an accent that isn’t your own is like wearing a mask. It feels like when you talk to someone wearing sunglasses. It can be

uncomfortable to talk with them, because we miss the information we’re used to getting by observing the speaker’s eyes – a key part of their facial expression.

Of course, this doesn't mean it's necessarily bad to copy a native speaker accent. It just means that you should be yourself with it. Don't be fake.

This also doesn't mean you can ignore the way you sound. The trick is to speak with a *clear* accent and *clear* pronunciation. This really isn't anything to do with your accent, though. It's all about rhythm and how you group words together into phrases (something we’ll talk about more in Chapter 6). Whether you pronounce the basic sounds correctly, and whether you add stress where stress would be expected.

How English Mastery Really Works

“*It’s the most simple things in life that are the most extraordinary”*, says Brazilian writer Paulo Coelho.

I agree. Indeed, mastering a language is not complicated. On the contrary, it’s very, very simple. One of the big mistakes I made when I was struggling with Japanese was always looking for a better way to learn, and “new” methods for improving.

I would try things, but quickly doubt myself and end up thinking I needed to find a better way. I repeated this process again and again and again. I went from trying to learn by listening to Japanese all day, every day, to studying textbooks, to trying to learn by practising with native speakers, to trying to memorise lists of vocabulary.

All of these things can be useful, but what I was doing had no balance. I *did* a lot of stuff…but it was all so random and messy. There was no structure or consistency to what I was doing.

The result?

My Japanese was also messy and random with no structure or consistency.

Improving in a second language is actually very, very simple. Not easy to do to be sure, but extremely simple.

It comes down to a very simple three-step process.

- Step 1: Notice what you don't know.
- Step 2: Learn the language that you need.
- Step 3: Automate the language you’ve learned by practising and actually *doing* the language.

Simple, right?

Yes, it is. But as with anything, the devil is once again in the details. What language do you need to learn? How do you notice what you don’t

know, and what you need most? What is the most effective way to learn that language? And what is the most effective way to automate it?

Never fear: that is the content of this book. But first, in order to make this easier to understand, let's take a look at *"Noel Burch's 4 Stages of Competence"* – the theoretical background of this method. I'll warn you now: this is going to get a bit deep. But stick with it. This is the most complicated part of this book, but it's worth the effort.

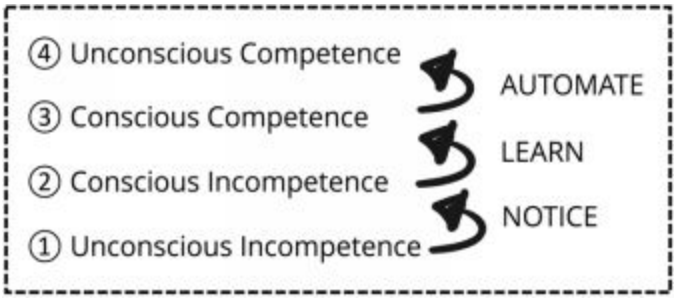
The 4 Stages of Competence

In the 1970s, Noel Burch, an employee at *Gordon Training International*, developed a remarkable model of skill learning. Originally he called it the "Four stages for learning any new skill", but over the years, memory experts have refined Burch's theory to give us *"The Four Stages of Competence"*.

The Four Stages are:

- Unconscious Incompetence
- Conscious Incompetence
- Conscious Competence
- Unconscious Competence

If you're sharp, you'll notice that the Three Steps I discussed above are the transition points – the steps you need to take in order to move from one stage to the next. This sounds complicated. But it's not. The whole thing looks like this:



Let's imagine you're walking down the street, and you see a sign that says "Fresh Coffee". Curious, you enter the shop. You've never heard of coffee before. You don't know what it is. You don't know that it's a drink.

And you don’t know that you need to order it: you think maybe they just give it to everyone who comes in. So you have no idea that you need to ask the barista for the coffee you want.

Unconscious Incompetence is where you don’t know something, and you don’t know that you don’t know it. In terms of English, this could be, for example, that you don’t know how useful it is to be able to talk about the weather. You don’t know how to talk about that topic, AND you don’t realise how useful it would be to learn. Not until you *notice* that other people can do it, and you can’t.

You’re stood in the coffee shop, wondering what’s going on. You notice other people are speaking to the man behind the counter and getting a cup filled with brown liquid. *So this is ‘coffee’*, you think. It’s a drink. I need to order a cup…but wait: *I don’t know what to say in order to do that.*

As soon as you notice that you can’t do something, you move to Stage Two, which is called *Conscious Incompetence*. Now you are conscious of the fact that you don’t know the language you need for this particular topic. You *know* that you can’t talk about this, and you still need to learn how to do it. So you need to move yourself to Stage Three.

You are aware that you need to order a cup of coffee. So you learn the language you need. You might listen to what other people are saying and copy them. You might pull out your iPhone and look it up on Google. Or you might just ask someone what you should say. However you do it, you learn the language you need.

You have now moved yourself to the third stage: *Conscious Competence*. You can now talk about this topic, but you’re still very conscious of the process. You have to work hard at it. Maybe in your head you’re translating from your native language. You are consciously constructing the sentences that you want to use. With the coffee example, you’re struggling to remember the words you just learnt. Maybe some of them are hard to pronounce because you’ve never tried to make those sounds before (Japanese for example doesn’t have all the sounds in the word “coffee”). Regardless, it’s a slow and painful process.

So you need to automate this language – so you can do it automatically, without thinking about it.

You go into the shop’s bathroom and practise repeating your request in front of the mirror. You practise until you can make your request smoothly

and easily. When you go to the counter and speak to the barista now, the words just flow.

Congratulations!

You've gotten to the final stage: *Unconscious Competence.* This is the stage I have in mind when I talk about "Forgetting your English" or "Forgetting that English isn't your first language." You're speaking without effort, just like you do in your native language.

Now, obviously this is a very simple example (and a little bit silly), but I hope you get the idea. Normally, it will take time to move through the stages. However, as we'll talk about later, if you focus enough on a very, very specific goal, you can move quite quickly through the four stages.

The Myth of Learning English

You probably already noticed this, but what is really important to realise here is that *you will never go through these four stages for English as a whole*.

You never get good at English. You get good at doing certain things in English.

This is why your *Why* is so damn important, and why I won't shut the fuck up about it. I'm going to bang on and on and on and on and on about your *Why* all the way through this book – so if you didn't take the time to think about it, you should now. In the example I just gave you, being able to order a coffee at the level of a native speaker is one very specific goal. It doesn't include all sorts of other things, like going into a tailor's shop and knowing how to order a custom-made suit.

Different situation, different language.

This means you could be at Stage 4 for one topic, but Stage 1 or 2 for another. You will go through these four stages again and again and again and again for multiple topics. Of course, there will be a lot of overlap between topics, because much of the language you use can be applied to many different situations. But there will also be some language that's unique to a specific topic.

You might be able to chat about the weather at the level of a native speaker, but be unable to talk about your job easily. What generally happens though is the exact opposite – you'll be able to talk about your job fluently and speak well in formal situations…but totally fail when it comes to small-

talk topics and casual everyday conversation. (Incidentally, this is why I put a big emphasis on small-talk topics and conversations in the *EES Weekly Lessons*.)

I once worked with an executive at a chemical engineering company. He told me how he could go to a conference and discuss his particular specialisation at a Stage 4 level. No problem. He's completely fluent in that topic, and the words just flow.

But several times, after a conference, he was invited out for drinks. The tone of conversation and the way people spoke would suddenly switch – and suddenly he wouldn't have a clue what anybody was talking about. In those situations, he was only at Stage 1 or 2.

Fluency is topic-specific. There is no becoming fluent in English. Only becoming fluent in topics.

Right now you might be feeling a little scared. Surely the number of topics you might need to speak about is unlimited? How could you possible learn everything? *The good news is that you don't have to.* As with many things, simply being aware of this reality makes it OK. The problem comes in when people say things like, "I want to speak English well," but they have no idea where, or with whom they want to speak English. They haven't yet gotten clear on their *Why*.

Learning All the Language You Need

It should be obvious that to speak a language, you need *language*. But it’s not so easy to figure out *what* language you need.

Imagine that our goal is to speak English as well as a native speaker (even though yes, as we’ve already talked about, this isn’t a very good goal). So let’s ask how much of their language *they* actually know.

Now, this is actually a very difficult question to answer. First, because no two people are ever going to be the same. But it’s even hard to define what a word really is. For example, the word "eat" is clearly a word. But how do we count "eats" or "eaten"? It’s seems strange to consider "eat" and "eats" as separate words, but they do have different meanings….so why not?

Then what about "ate"? Its form is different to "eat", and it means something different. Should we count these as separate words? Or is it still the same word?

When we consider that most verbs have multiple forms—*eat, eats, eaten, eating, ate*—the question of how we count them is obviously very, very important. And this is why you will see so many different estimates of the number of words in English.

Generally, though, we say that there are about 1,000,000 words in English. This is a good estimate, in my opinion, not least because it keeps the math simple (and I bloody hate math).

So, now that we've decided on the number of words, let’s ask how many does your average Billy Boy native speaker know? Unfortunately, this isn't a simple question, either. Someone like me who has a PhD is obviously going to have a larger vocabulary than someone who only graduated from secondary school. Unless that person is an enthusiastic reader – in which case they may well know more than me.

If this discussion is starting to irritate you, welcome to the world of linguistics. I had to put up with this shit all through my academic career.

A good estimate is 25,000 words, on the assumption that the person has an undergraduate degree and has just finished university. So, we're talking about your average British 22-year-old.

Now, hang on just a minute…

That ain't many words?

Even someone as mathematically challenged as me will quickly work out that this is only 2.5% of the words in English! That's a tiny, tiny, tiny percentage.

Does this make the average person an illiterate idiot? No. It simply means that we don't actually need that many words to communicate well.

This means two important things for you.

First, you obviously can't learn everything. I mean: if native speakers only know 2.5% of the words in their language, for you to try and learn all the words is unrealistic and, frankly, stupid.

Ammon Shea, author of *"Reading the Oxford Dictionary: one man, one year, 21,730 pages"* himself says:

> *"As far as hobbies go, it is as most of them are – largely useless. Contrary to what many self-help books would have you believe, adding a great number of obscure words to your vocabulary will not help you advance in the world. You will not gain new friends through this kind of endeavour, nor will it help you in the workplace. At best you might bore your friends and employers and at worst you will alienate them, or leave them thinking that there is something a little bit wrong with you."*

So there we go.

Even the guy who read the entire bloody Oxford Dictionary thinks it's a waste of time. (Hint: read Shea's book instead – it's excellent. I especially like the introduction where he talks about getting blinding headaches from spending too much time reading the dictionary.)

My Mate Vilfredo

While this is all very interesting (or at least I think it is – you can tell I'm not very popular at parties, right?), we're still stuck. Which words should you learn?

The truth is: you should focus not on individual *words*, but rather on *phrases* that show how words are commonly put together. We're going to talk about this in detail in a minute. But first I want to introduce you to my mate Vilfredo.

Vilfredo Pareto – ever heard of him?

He was a nineteenth-century Italian economist who made one of the most important discoveries of the century: *the 80/20 Principle*.

The 80/20 Principle was popularised by Richard Koch in his book "*The 80/20 Principle*" (another one that you should read), but the concept was in no way original to him.

Pareto conducted a study and found that 80% of Italy's wealth was owned by just 20% of the people. And everybody else – a massive 80% of the population – had the little bits that were left over. The remaining 20%.

Other people got interested in this and did similar studies in other countries finding the exact same pattern. The same distribution of wealth is found everywhere: 80% of the wealth is always owned by around 20% of the people.

There are powerful reasons for this, but it's related to the (very predictable) way that people behave and the way that this behaviour shapes society as a whole.

Incidentally, this same reason is why communism has always failed. It's simply not in people's nature to behave in the way socialist ideology says they should.

It's not just money where we see this massive imbalance, though. It's everywhere, and importantly it doesn't have to be exactly 80/20, either.

Often the imbalance will be more like 90 to 10 or even 99 to 1. But as a general rule, we say the 80/20 rule, because it's easy to remember.

What are some other things that follow the principle? Take a look in your wardrobe at all the clothes you own. You'll find that you wear about 20% of them 80% of the time.

I own a ridiculous amount of clothes. More than my wife and kids put together. (You should see my shoe cupboard!) Guess what? I don't wear most of them most of the time. Of all my clothes, I wear about 20% of them 80% percent of the time.

As I write this, I'm looking down at the carpet in my office. Of all the space on the carpet, about 20% of it has most of the damage. The wear and tear is all in the space around my feet and computer chair. It's completely

worn out – so thin that I can basically see the wooden floor through it. But the edges? They're like new.

In any computer software, 20% of the functions will do 80% of the work.

In any activity, just 20% of the effort will give you 80% of the results. Then to get the final 20%...you've got to put in a massive 80% more effort.

This very book, for example: I wrote the first draft in a couple of afternoons. But editing what I wrote has taken a couple of months.

I could go on giving examples all day, but I won't.

The point is, the 80/20 rule is a force of nature that can help us understand loads of different things – including how to study English most efficiently.

80/20 English

The first time I came across the 80/20 rule was as memorable (and orgasmic) as the first time I had sex.

The sudden realisation that I could just cut out 80% of what I was doing…and still get most of the results.

Make sure you read Richard Koch's famous book (mentioned above), and another one I highly recommend is Perry Marshall's "80/20 Sales and Marketing".

More than Koch's book, reading Marshall's is what really made me understand the true power of the 80/20 principle.

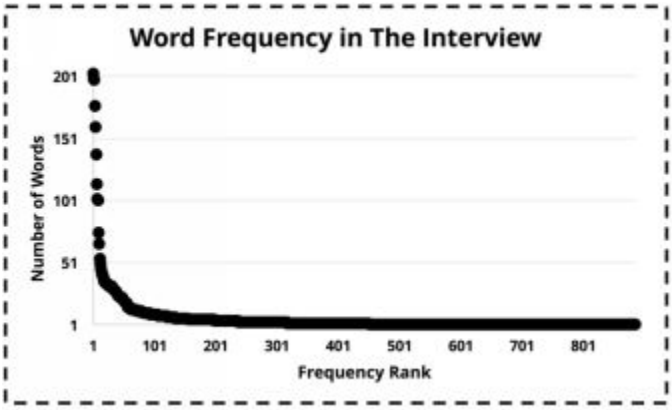
How does all this relate to your English?

Well, of all the words, phrases, chunks, idioms, expressions, and grammar patterns that speakers know, they use just 20% of them 80% of the time.

Let me demonstrate.

I took one of my 'Extraordinary English Conversations' (an interview with the CEO of a large and successful business that I did as part of the EES programme) and counted all the words. Then I ranked them from most frequent to least, and plotted them on a graph.

This is what I got:



In the hour long conversation, there were 5096 words in total, and 887 different words. So if I take the top 20% of the different words—177 words—that gives me a total of 3887 words. Which works out as 76% of the total number of words.

See what I mean?

20% of the language gets used 80% of the time. If you just learned 177 words, you'd be able to understand at least 76% of our conversation.

The point I'm trying to make here is that not all language is equal. Some items of language are infinitely more useful than others, and the more you focus your time and effort on the useful stuff, the faster your results will be.

Don't misinterpret this, though. Most people's reaction to this is to go looking for lists of the most common words, phrases and expressions in English. But actually this is counter-productive. Why? *Because those lists won't match you and your Why.*

Remember: your goal is not to learn the whole English language, but to learn the English *you* need in *your* life and work. And that will be very different for different people.

The Three Types of Language

About a year and a half ago, my cheap (but long suffering) bike got damaged, and the cost of repair was going to be more than the bike was worth. So I decided to get a new one. There's an area of Tokyo that I love called *"Yanaka"*, and every time I was there I'd seen a cool-looking bike shop – a place called *"Tokyobike"* (I've seen people riding them in London too, by the way). It was the first time I'd ever bought a road bike (my old

one was a cheap off-the-shelf model from the local supermarket), and I rather naively thought I could just walk in, pick one, and walk out with it.

Oooooh noooo.

At this shop you basically pick your frame, then customise it with parts to suit. They then take your order, assemble the bike, and you pick it up two weeks later.

I walked into the shop, and the shop assistant turned to me and asked, “Can I help you?” (in Japanese). I tell her, “Yes, I’d like to buy a road bike, but I’m not sure what I need.”

So far this is a very standard conversation. You could easily walk into a tailor’s and ask for a new suit with the same language – “I’d like to buy a suit, but I’m not sure what I need.” But then the conversation turned to brakes, gears, tires and saddles.

Try walking into a tailor’s and asking them to adjust your saddle – it’s not going to work.

Even at my level of Japanese, this was surprisingly difficult. I knew all the basic language the lady was using, but I wasn’t familiar with the names of many parts of the bike. I also didn’t know what to call different types of handle bars in Japanese – for example, I wanted to ask what’s the difference between a straight pair of handle bars and the rams-horn style. But I didn’t know what those were called.

I got the job done in the end, but it was far from eloquent. Before I went back to collect the bike, I spent some time watching Japanese YouTube videos about bikes, bike repairs and bike shops.

I now know that those handlebars shaped like rams’ horns aren’t even called that in English – they’re called “drop handlebars”, and in Japanese *“duropu handoru”*.

The point I want you to get from this is that there are three types of language. **One:** Very, very common, high-utility language that gets used everywhere, in almost any kind of topic or situation **Two:** Language that is still quite common, but only in certain specific situations, such as a bike shop. **Three:** basically everything else.

Type One Language

When the shop assistant asked me, “Can I help you?” she was using Type One language. This is the true 80/20 language: It’s the fundamental

language that gets used in any kind of situation, again and again and again.

This is mostly going to be phrases and expressions that get used in many situations, such as: “Can I help you?” and “Yes, please.” Here we will also find groups of words that are usually stuck together in a certain way.

For example, groups of words like *‘the first thing...’* This little group or **“chunk”** of words is used over and over again:

- ‘The first thing I do in the morning is make a cup of coffee.’
- ‘The first thing to look for when buying a bike is this…’
- ‘The first thing you need to do if you want to improve your English is this…’

Here’s another example of a common chunk of words: *‘I’d go for…’*

Imagine we’re at a restaurant: “If I were you, *I’d go for* the curry; it’s really good.”

But in a bike shop, the assistant might be giving you a recommendation: “*I’d go for* twelve or sixteen gears”.

Again, here we’re talking about high-frequency, very, very common language: phrases, expressions and chunks that get used in basically any kind of situation you can imagine, all the time.

This is the most important language that you can ever learn, because once you learn it in one situation, you can apply it to loads and loads of other situations, over and over again.

Type Two Language

When the shop assistant explained to me how to adjust the brakes, saddle and chain she was using Type Two language. This is language which is still quite common, but is specific to a particular situation.

In terms of the bike shop example: words like ‘cog,’ ‘chain,’ ‘handlebars,’ and ‘saddle’. These are fairly common words, but they get used only when you’re talking about bikes. You wouldn’t say ‘cog,’ ‘chain,’ or ‘handlebars’ if you worked in finance or wanted to order a burger in McDonalds. If you are in medicine, you're probably not going to be saying ‘bike saddle’ every single day.

For you, Type Two language will mainly be the language you need in your particular job, profession or specialty. Most people who use English at

work learn this type of language quite quickly, because they run into it every day, over and over again. This is why most people find talking about their job fairly easy, but struggle with things like small talk.

Type Three Language

Finally, Type Three language is all the rest. It's the stuff that isn't very common…isn't very useful…and isn't even specific to your industry.

Now, I can't say learning this language is completely useless, because all language is used somewhere. But here we're really talking about 80 percent of the effort giving us just 20 percent of the results. You have to put in a lot of effort to learn Type Three language, but you don't really get much back from it.

This is where most people tend to go wrong. The tendency is to think: "More vocabulary is always better, so I must learn every word, phrase or expression I ever come across." This ultimately leads to memorising word lists. But in reality most of what you try to learn in this way doesn't connect to you and your *Why* and ends up forgotten very, very quickly. So on the whole it's a waste of your valuable time.

So How Many Words Should You Learn?

Now we come full-circle, right back to the beginning of this chapter. What words should you learn, and how many do you need to speak English well?

By now, you should be able to see that the only realistic answer to this question is: *It depends on you and your Why.*

Everything I've talked about in this chapter is first and foremost a mindset shift.

I *can't* point you to a list of words that you should learn and say, "This is all you need," because that's bullshit. There are such lists available (the General Service List, or the Academic Words List), but these are old, based on old research, and old ways thinking.

If you need a goal to work towards, then I say aiming for the native-speaker number of 25,000 words is a good bet. Now, this is impossible to measure, and as I'm going to explain in the next chapter, focusing on

individual words isn't a very good idea anyway. So I recommend this: aim to learn 25,000 common *chunks* of language.

To make things simple, we can say native speakers take 25 years to learn this much – so that's about 1000 items a year. That works out as 2.7 items a day.

Learn on average 3 chunks, phrases or expressions a day and you will move forward at lightning speed…*if* you learn them *well* and you focus first on Type One language, then on Type Two.

Incidentally, the EES Weekly Lessons work on this basis. I can't really help people with Type Two members from all kinds of different businesses and industries (although you will find some of the lessons are related to your specific interests). So I focus on Type One language, and aim to include, on average, about 20 items a week.

See how that works?

You don't need the lessons or materials I make, of course. I use this as an example because, obviously, materials I make are based on the principles we're discussing here. Any material will work as long as it's a source of native-like language rich in *chunks* to learn. I just make it easy by giving you materials filled with the most useful language.

I keep mentioning chunks. What are these chunks? And why should you be concentrating on them? Because this is quite a big topic, it gets the next chapter all to itself.

Learning Language Focused on Fluency and Naturalness

When I was a teenager, my family had a dog called Cassy. She was a bearded collie—a truly beautiful breed of dog—and very, very excitable. So excitable in fact, that whenever people came to visit us…*she'd end up peeing on the carpet.*

Well, that's exactly how I feel right now.

This is the part of the book I've been looking forward to. *Chunking.*

Don't worry.

I'm not going to pee on your carpet. But I am going to geek out a bit.

Chunking is my area of speciality, along with fluency and the concept of "naturalness" – and indeed, these things are exactly what *chunks* help native speakers to do.

So why are these so-called "chunks" so important?

Well, one of my EES members asked in the Community:

> *"I have a pretty vast vocabulary. But it feels so hard to express my thoughts and emotions. Sometimes I'm frustrated that I can't find the correct words or the correct phrases."*

The key here is: *"I have a pretty vast vocabulary… but...still struggle to find the words."*

People tend to be somewhat obsessed with vocabulary. I'm always hearing people say, "*If only I knew more words, I would be able to speak English better.*" But is that really the case?

Most of the time, no.

If you can understand most of what I'm writing here, you probably don't *need* more vocabulary. Of course, all else being equal, more

vocabulary is better than less. Of course. That goes without saying. But the words themselves are only one part of the equation.

Learning more and more words tends to end up in the category of 80 percent effort, but only 20 percent of the results. This is because (as I already demonstrated in the previous chapter) you really don't need that many words.

What is important—and almost definitely what you are failing to do now—is how you combine the words you've got. And in order to do that you need pretty ***deep*** knowledge regarding the vocabulary that you do have.

There's a famous saying in linguistics from the researcher Rupert Firth: *"You shall know a word by the company it keeps."*

What he meant by this is that in order to know a word well, you need to know what words go together with it.

A good example of this is the word 'cause.' As a verb, 'cause' means: *to bring about a result*. Something causes something else. Simple, right? Well, no. Because what you can't tell from the dictionary definition is that the word 'cause' is used mainly in ***unpleasant*** situations. We don't use the word 'cause' in positive, happy-sounding phrases. For example, some of the chunks you might see using 'cause' are: *cause of death*, *cause pain*, *cause acute discomfort.* You don't "cause happiness" or "cause a person to love you".

Here are some other common chunks. We say, "plastic surgery" and not "plastic operation." "Good morning" sounds natural, but "Pleasant first half of the day" doesn't. We say, "Could you help me?" and not "Could you aid me?" These are ways in which native speakers chunk language.

All of the alternatives are grammatical, but for whatever reason, they're just not what people say. They're not *chunks*.

This is important because native speakers primarily speak with chunks. Yes, we can use grammar rules and individual words to make creative sentences. We can. But most of the time we don't, simply because this is a really inefficient use of processing power.

A good analogy for chunks is the shortcut keys you have on your computer. Sure, I could click through menus to find the "save" option every time I want to save my document – but it's much faster and easier to click Command-S.

My wife gets very frustrated with me whenever I show her how to use Premier Pro—the software we use for editing all the videos we make—

because I took the time to learn all the shortcut keys. I don't actually remember how to find many of the functions I use via the complicated menu system.

The reason native speakers are able to sound so fluent and natural is because they *do not* construct their language using grammar rules and individual words – they simply store chunks in memory and use them *as is*.

What this means for you is this: if you concentrate on learning chunks, you're going to get the same benefit from them as native speakers do. But if you study the way many people do—individual words and grammar rules—you're basically learning to compute language the hard way, and ignoring all the "shortcut keys" of English that are called *chunks.*

Some Different Kinds of Chunks

One of my favourite things to do is to sit on a bench in a busy part of Tokyo and just watch people go by. People are not just people – there are all kinds.

Young people. Old people. Rich people. Poor people. Clever people. Stupid people. People who love their jobs. People who hate their jobs. People who have lost their jobs and now have no job at all. Artists, bankers, homeless people, business men, chefs, designers, factory workers, carpenters, company presidents and maintenance men. People who are funny. People who are dead boring. Straight people and gay people. People who are ugly, people who are beautiful. People doing amazing things with their lives and people who hate their lives and just want to die.

In the same way, there are many different kinds of chunks. Some big, some small. Some sexier than others.

My personal research focuses on a kind of chunk called a "lexical bundle" – or what I call a "grammatical chunk". This means a chunk that is several words long, and that gets pronounced as a single unit, but is not a complete phrase (unlike an idiom or a complete expression). Good examples are things like: "in the middle of the…," "let me tell you about…", "at the end of the day…" But as I said, there are many different kinds of "chunk".

Here are the main, most important ones:

- **Idioms**: the cat is out of the bag; Bob's your uncle

- **Collocations**: “heavy rain” – but not “thick rain”
- **Binomials**: “fish and chips” – but not “chips and fish”
- **Phrasal verbs**: go over; get into
- **Lexical bundles**: in the middle of…, first of all…
- **Conventional expressions**: "How are you?" and "Good morning!"

The easiest ones to spot are the idioms and conventional expressions, and most of you will be familiar with these already.

These are also the ones you want to spend most of your time and energy on learning.

Idioms are chunks that have a fixed meaning, normally (but not always) totally different to the literal meaning of the words. Idioms often have interesting stories behind them, too. For example, the idiom “a white elephant” refers to a gift or thing that you have been given that you don’t want, but feel obliged to keep.

When I was younger, my mother had this horrible clock that my grandmother gave her. It was an antique and quite valuable, apparently. It was a huge black thing made out of stone and shaped like the Roman Pantheon. Every hour it would chime: *gong, gong, gong, gong.* This clock was truly horrible, so my mum kept it hidden in a cupboard somewhere and only got it out when my grandmother came to visit. This is a perfect example of a white elephant.

But the idiom also has a cultural story behind it. It comes from the kings of Siam, now known as Thailand. When someone did something to upset the king, he would give them a white elephant – which they’d be burdened with. The white elephant was considered special, and wasn’t allowed to work. Neither could it be given away. Yet it was expensive to keep. So expensive that people given one would be ruined.

There are a lot of idioms like this in English, and the chances are you’ve dedicated some time to learning them. Do learn idioms. Apart from that fact that using them well will make you sound more natural, they’re an important part of the culture of English. This said, most idioms aren’t actually *that* common. So do learn them…but make sure you learn them from real English that you hear other people use. Don’t waste time with lists of idioms that you find online.

Example-Based Learning

The next logical question then is: How do we learn in chunks? Well, this too really is a mindset shift.

When I learned French at school, we started by learning basic sentence structure, nouns and some adjectives. We learned: “le chat” (the cat), then we were taught how to add an adjective to that: “le chat noir” (the black cat). When we learned this, I remember being interested in the fact that French puts adjectives after the noun…. Interested for all of about 5 seconds, but then I forgot about it. So in our homework when I was asked to make some examples, I made the usual mistake: I wrote something like “le blanc chien” (the dog white) and “le rouge cochon” (the pig red).

This is a really simple example, and yes, you would expect that I could remember such a simple rule. But as soon as the rules start to get even slightly complicated…basically *nobody* can get them right most of the time.

This is because it’s not the way we actually process language. We don’t process language by using rules to combine individual words. We process language in whole chunks.

There’s a great scene in the film *Captain America: Civil War*. The character named “Vision” is cooking ‘paprikash’, a Hungarian dish. He’s got a recipe in front of him, and he is following the instructions. It says, *“a pinch of paprika”*, so he adds a pinch. He does it to make Wanda, another character (who is Hungarian), feel better. It’s a nice idea, but the problem is that Vision is an android and doesn’t eat food. He’s never eaten anything, let alone paprikash. So obviously he has no idea what it should taste like. He can only follow the rules and hope it works.

Wanda tries his cooking and says, *“I don’t know what’s in this… but it’s not paprikash.”*

Vision’s cooking attempt fails.

The way language is taught in schools is like the way Vision tries to cook. It’s actually backwards. You get taught grammar rules and words, then you’re expected to produce language from this. But just like with cooking, this only works if you already know what the end result should look like.

When learning language, always go the other way. Start with samples of real language, and aim to understand and copy that sample. Never the other way around. Always chunks of real language first – then produce language based on that.

Do you remember the three-step method for improving your English that we talked about in Chapter Four? First **notice** the language you don't know – in this case, notice the common chunks in samples of real conversation, **learn** it, then **automate** it via practice.

The key, however, is noticing the chunks. You'll never learn what you don't notice.

The big change here is not what we actually do…but rather how we look at the language. We stop looking at language as a list of individual words, and instead we focus on larger units of language. We focus on chunks.

Learning the language really can be as simple as getting a notebook and a pen and writing down the common chunks, phrase and expressions that you come across in the materials you study. Nothing here has to be complicated. Indeed, this is exactly what I do when learning Japanese these days. In the past, I used to use an app called "Anki" that allows you to make intelligent flashcards. The software calculates when you're likely to forget something, and shows it to you at just the right time.

I don't use Anki anymore, because I find that it's too much hassle. A notebook and a pen works almost—not quite, but almost—as well. What I have done, however, is record a video showing you how to use Anki if you want to. You can find it in the resource area listed in the back of this book.

Let's take a look at some examples. I'm going to use samples from conversations we study in the EES Weekly Lessons (which members of my English learning community, 'Julian Northbrook's League of Extraordinary English Speakers,' get as part of their membership). I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to show these off. (I put a lot of work into creating these materials, after all, so why wouldn't I want to tempt you to join the membership programme?)

But the main reason is simply that it's hard to get permission to use samples of other people's stuff (copyright law can be a real pain in the ass). Also, my materials have been optimised based on the principles we're looking at here – but look at any sample of real conversation (such as you might find in a YouTube video, for example), and you'll see exactly the same thing.

"Passing the Time of Day"

The EES Weekly Lesson “Passing the time of day” is a conversation between Felix and Dan. Felix begins telling the story like this:

> *It was Saturday morning and the cupboard was bare. As I locked my door, ready to set off for the supermarket, my new neighbour Dan emerged from his apartment at the same time.*
>
> *"Hey! How's it going?" he asked. "How are you settling in?"*
>
> *"I'm fine thanks," I replied. "I'm just off to stock up my fridge. There's nothing left…*

Notice the phrases that are used to connect with the other person and start the conversation. “How’s it going?” and “How are you settling in?” are both examples of what linguists call ‘phatic communication’ – that is, phrases and expressions that are used to greet people, start conversations or say goodbye. In the same way, “I’m fine, thanks,” is a standard response – because Felix understands here that Dan is not asking about his health. Then, at the end of the conversation, Dan says:

> *"Give us a shout if you need anything. We must go out for a beer some time."*
>
> *"I'm up for that," I said as we went our separate ways.*

The phrase “Give us a shout if you need anything” is another an example of phatic communication. While Dan probably is sincere (if Felix asks for help, Dan will give it) this is not why he says it – rather he is indicating that the conversation is over. The phrase “We must go out for a beer,” is a continuation of this – and in the same way, “I’m up for that” is an acknowledgement that the conversation is over.

The point is this: when native speakers talk, they are always using chunks like this in clever ways to do things that might not be related to the literal meaning of the words. Meaning is very often found much deeper than

the actual words used; you have to look at how words are used in phrases, and how phrases are used as part of the overall conversation.

"Damning with Faint Praise"

When I was a university student, a friend of mine fancied this girl in our class. He was a bit shy, and not very good with girls…but we kept teasing him and telling him he should ask her out.

Then one day we were in the student bar having a couple of pints for lunch (with our tutor no less – remember, I was an art student) and this girl was there.

So my mate, he suddenly stands up, downs his drink, and announces: "I'm going to ask her out!!"

He walks right up to her and says, *"Hey, would you like to go to lunch with me tomorrow?"*

Even writing this makes me cringe, because she turned around with a cold smile on her face and said, "Sorry, I think I'm washing my hair then."

My mate was understandably devastated…though not for long, because we skipped afternoon classes and just kept drinking…

What does this even mean though: "I think I'm washing my hair then"?

Well, obviously she wasn't actually planning to wash her hair. That's not exactly the sort of thing we plan in advance. No. This is an expression with an idiomatic meaning – it basically means: "No way! Washing my hair is far more exciting to me than going to lunch with you."

In other words, "I'm not at all interested in spending time with you!"

This is a pretty harsh thing to say.

Here's another example of this in a different situation. A group of friends have just been to an art gallery opening party held by Jake.

The friends didn't like Jake's art, and they're joking among themselves (behind his back) about the party, and, well, being a little bit mean.

Look for the example of "I think I'm washing my hair", and see how many other chunks you can spot:

"How was it?" Jake asked me as we were leaving.

"It was just what I expected," I said. "Definitely food for thought!"

"You must be very proud," added Dan. "I've never seen anything like it!"

"It's the first time I've been to the opening of an exhibition," said Claire. "What a different experience this evening has been."

He handed her an invitation.

"Well there's another opening next Friday, if you're interested," said Jake.

"Thanks!" she said brightly.

We collected our coats and headed for the door.

"Hmm," she said to me, as we left. "I think I may be washing my hair that night."

Do you see how many chunks there are in this very short stretch of conversation?

It's basically *all* chunks. There isn't room here in this book to go through them all, but check out the resource area where I've given you this lesson. There I walk you through the whole conversation step-by-step.

"Moving On"

Here's another example of a conversation where Kemi, the person *listening* to her friend and ex-coworker, uses cleverly timed phrases to keep

the conversation moving forward. Tom is telling her how different his new job (at Google) is to his old office job:

> *"I can't begin to tell you how different it all is," said Tom. "It took me a while to get used to it. For a start, we can play table tennis in the office and there's a slide, computer games and a great canteen."*

> *"You're having me on!" said Kemi.*

> *"No, seriously," continued Tom. "There's also a granny flat where you can sit and relax, and – get this – a little caravan where you can have meetings."*

> *"What on earth is the point of that?" wondered Kemi.*

> *"It's supposed to make the staff feel more creative, apparently," said Tom. "The trouble is, with all these quirky features taking up so much of the space, it's surprisingly difficult to find somewhere quiet to think."*

Kemi uses the chunks in bold to show she is interested in what Tom is saying, and to indicate that she wants to hear more. Really, the literal meaning of the phrases is irrelevant – what matters is the way they're used in the context of the conversation.

Again, do you see how that works? Most of the words we see here are quite ordinary words. But it's the way these words are combined and used in conversation that matters. This shows why concentrating on the common chunks, phrases, expressions and idioms in this conversation is much more effective that worrying about the vocabulary.

Space here in this book is limited, so what I've done is to give you access to these lessons in the resource area that comes with this book (see the "Resources" section at the back). Go through the lessons, and really pay attention to the way the conversations are constructed. It takes a little practice, but once you get used to seeing language not as rules and

individual words, but as *chunk*s, you'll start to see exactly the same thing in all conversation and real language use.

How Much Should You Memorise?

I'll be totally honest: *I hate memorising stuff*.

When I was studying for the Japanese Proficiency test (which I took only because I thought I wanted to become a translator), I worked with a tutor who had me memorise loads of example sentences.

Sure, it worked. But it was painful and I hated it.

And two months after the test?

I'd forgotten it all anyway.

So give yourself a break: you don't need to memorise everything and anything. Generally, if you're struggling to remember something, it's either because it isn't useful, or because you don't understand how it's supposed to be used in context. If something is useful enough, you *will* see it again when you're reading, speaking, or listening to English.

The important thing is awareness. It's about noticing chunks and how they're used by native speakers. The more aware you become of chunks, the more they will start to stand out to you. And chunks are also highly repetitive, so just "doing" your life in English will help you to memorise them.

Depth of understanding is far, far more important than remembering lots of stuff you don't really know how to use. So in general there's no reason to force yourself to memorise things. Just become aware of things going on in the language samples you study, and then practise using them.

One very, very good thing to do is extensive reading and listening. This is when you're reading or listening to English for pleasure, or to acquire some kind of information – *not* to study English. You're not stopping to look up things you don't know, or even trying to understand everything. You're just reading and listening in exactly the same way as you would in your native language.

Now, this by itself isn't very useful. Just doing extensive reading and listening tends to be very ineffective, because most people don't notice the things they need to learn. But it's a fantastic way to reinforce your careful, analytical study. If you study the way I suggested in the last section, you'll be learning lots of very useful chunks. Then in your relaxed reading or

listening, *you'll hear those same chunks and bits of language*. When you do that, they will stand out, and you will be like, "Ah ha!! I learned that recently!"

A Word on Chunking and Pronunciation

I'm going to keep this short, because we've already talked about pronunciation and accent in Chapter 3.

People who try to pronounce every word clearly and distinctly are *not* easy to understand. This is because when we speak naturally, we emphasise only the most important words and pass over the rest quite quickly. This allows us to save brain-power by essentially ignoring the unimportant stuff.

What this m eans is: if you over-pronounce every single word, it will make you *harder* to understand, not easier.

One of the reasons native speakers might sound like they speak really fast is because they "chunk" their language. For example, a phrase such as "at the end of the day" is actually a single unit of language, so it *gets pronounced* as a single unit. So although there are six words in this phrase when we write it down, in the brain of a native speaker it functions like one word. So the correct pronunciation is actually not "At. The. End. Of. The. Day", but "athendovthday".

So when you are learning, you want to pay close attention to the way native speakers pronounce chunks – in particular, those incomplete grammatical chunks that we talked about earlier. You'll see plenty of examples of this in the samples I give you in the resource area.

How to Sound Good and Not Be Boring

When I was an art student I hated writing essays. But more than writing them, I hated knowing I had an essay to write. So not wanting to leave it to the last minute, I'd head straight to the university library to write.

Writing these essays was painful. I had no idea what to write…so I had to force myself to do it.

After hours of work and frustration, I'd reach the word limit and consider myself finished.

Do you think I got good grades for these?

Of course I didn't!

My grades were awful.

Until one day when we got an essay on a topic I was really interested in. This time I didn't go straight to the library to write. Instead, I read books and watched videos on the topic. Then, when it was time to write, the words just flowed. I finished in half the time it normally took, and for the first time I was pleased with what I'd written.

This sounds kind of obvious, but you can't talk about a topic if you don't know anything about it. Simply put, if you don't know jack shit about a topic…you're not going to be able to speak about it well, no matter how good your language skills are. For example, I'm a specialist in two very different areas: psycholinguistics and direct response marketing. An odd combination, I know. But whatever.

When it comes to how the human brain acquires and processes language, I could talk non-stop for hours, because I have a fanatical amount of knowledge on this topic. I can talk about it in English, and in Japanese, completely fluently.

A lot of Japanese people, however, won't be able to talk about psycholinguistics fluently (or probably at all), because they don't know anything about it.

When it comes to something like law, on the other hand, I'm just as clueless. A friend of mine recently graduated from the same university where I did my PhD. She's a non-native speaker, and yes, she studied law. She can talk about this topic much more fluently than I can, because she has a greater depth of knowledge. She knows what she's talking about… literally!

When people say, "Oh, my mind went blank!" sometimes it's because they don't know the words they need…but often it's because they really don't know what to say. This is a problem of knowledge, not a problem of language.

Knowledge underlies everything that you talk about. Now, in work situations, I think this is kind of obvious, and also not really a problem. The chances are, if you are in a certain profession, you already know enough about that profession.

If you're a doctor, you probably know lots about medicine; you probably don't need to learn more about it. If you're an IT professional, you know lots about your field. You're a professional! Of course you do.

It seems obvious, but a lot of people miss this. Sure, you can spend a lot of time memorising lists of random vocabulary words. But what are you going to do with that vocabulary, if you have no knowledge of the topics where it's relevant? So dedicate time to just doing things, having exciting experiences, things that you can talk about.

Yes, of course learning words and phrases is an important part of getting really good at speaking a language. But learning about the world and life is also important. Remember: Experience drives learning, and it also drives the conversations that we have.

Dedicate time to doing things, to getting interesting content, filling your head up with stuff to talk about. Sometimes the best thing you can do for your English is go to the cinema and watch an interesting film; go to an art gallery and see a great exhibition; or get on the train and go somewhere you've never been before. You might not learn much language (maybe none, if it's in your native language), but it will give you topics to talk about.

And honestly? If you've got interesting things to say, people will forgive your language mistakes. Probably they won't even notice them.

Not so if you've got nothing to say.

People with nothing interesting to say are boring, no matter how fluent they are.

Having Stories to Tell

About 13 years ago, I went to China. I was staying in Hong Kong for five weeks to take photographs and research the art there. While I was there I decided to travel to a city called “Guangzhou” to visit the Guangzhou Art Museum.

At the time I was a student and had very little money, so I booked my hotel based on the low price. The hotel was on the opposite side of the city, but: “No problem,” I thought, “I’ll take the train.” I’d been taking trains everywhere in Hong Kong with no problems at all. I took a taxi from Guangzhou central station to the hotel where I was staying.

The next morning, I got up bright and early to go to the Guangzhou Art Museum.

I didn’t have a laptop, internet access or anything like that. Just a small guidebook that didn’t even give proper instructions on how to get to the museum. The only thing I knew was the name of the stop I needed.

I headed to the nearest underground station…and that’s when it hit me.

Underground stations in Guangzhou were totally different to the ones in Hong Kong. There was no English on the train maps.

I bought a ticket and went to the platform…but I had no idea where to go, or even what train to get on. I knew the name of the station I needed – but I couldn’t read any of the signs.

So I did what any other lost tourist would do – I asked the guard in the train station.

“Excuse me, do you speak English…?” I asked.

No response.

“Excuse m…"

I didn’t finish repeating myself, because right then the guard did something *shocking*. He just put his hand in my face and refused to speak to me.

Not exactly helpful.

I did the only thing I could. I left the station, pulled out my trusty tourist map…and started to walk. Of course, even with a map I got really

lost and it took me more than 5 hours to get the art museum (and it still took 3 hours to get back on the way home!).

You know what though? That walk turned out to be the best experience I had on my entire trip to Hong Kong and China. I saw so many interesting things that you just wouldn't normally see. Things that aren't in tourist guides. Everyday life. It also turned out that I went during the Mid-Autumn Festival. There were all these beautiful hand-crafted lamps everywhere.

I walked through back streets (probably not a safe thing to do) and parks and all kinds of different areas. And yes, I got stared at a lot.

There's this English kid in a punk-band t-shirt wandering around the streets of Guangzhou. But it was a fantastic experience. And although the art museum itself was fascinating, the walk there was definitely the best part.

The point of this story is that the best conversation topics we have are our own stories – and these only come from doing things and experiencing the world.

What started off as a negative experience actually gave me a great story to tell.

During that walk there was one experience in particular that stuck with me. I was waking up the street and went past a noodle shop. A big, stocky lady was stood outside, and she called me over and practically dragged me into her shop. No problem, I was hungry anyway.

I was sat at a table right in the middle of the shop, surrounded by old men who stared at me.

I felt like an animal in a zoo.

Nobody could speak English, and I couldn't speak Chinese. So I just let the lady give me anything she wanted.

I'm still not exactly sure what it was that I ate. But it was good – really good.

At first the woman gave me a spoon, but the thin, stringy noodles were impossible to eat like that. So I gestured for chopsticks. The old men cheered and then laughed when I couldn't use them well.

I paid, and left.

That was it. In total the experience lasted about 15 minutes. But it has always stuck with me.

Sometimes you just don't need language. Probably if I'd been able to speak Chinese it wouldn't have been such a memorable experience.

Fundamentally, people are people.

We have very difficult cultures, ways of thinking and ways of speaking. But we're all people. For just 15 minutes, I felt like that lady and the old guys in the shop were my best friends.

The point I'm trying to make here is that English is, first and foremost, about life. I've already argued that English itself is not useful – what matters is what you *do* with it. But it goes the other way, too. The more you do, the more useful your English will be: experience drives learning.

So actively set out to experience life. Collect experiences, and then tell your stories.

Using English as a Tool for Self-Education

Shakespeare was a clever guy, and by all accounts a great businessman.

He said a lot of great things, and we can learn a lot from his life and work. But here's one of the best: *"Ignorance is the curse of God; knowledge is the wing wherewith we fly to heaven."*

What Shakespeare meant here is that the key to success in life is *constantly educating yourself.*

More than 50% of the internet is still in English. So unless you speak Russian (6.5%), Japanese (5.6%), German (5.5%), or Spanish (5.1%), it's going to be pretty hard to find anything much in your own language.

Everybody's always talking about needing a native speaker to practise with. Well, if you want to use your English, why not open a book?

Remember: experience of and with language can come in all kinds of ways. One of the best things you can do for your English—and for yourself—is to learn about some other topic in English.

Here's a little story that illustrates this well, even if it is a little cheesy. Once upon a time, there was a bird. He was watching a bee work. The bee worked hard making honey. But the bird knew the bee could not keep the honey. Soon the humans would come and take it. The bee flew by the bird.

"Hey!" shouted the bird. *"Heeeeeeey Bee!!"*

"Let me ask you a question," the bird said.

"You make honey all day long. You work so hard. But then humans steal all your honey. Don't you feel sad? Don't you feel angry? Doesn't it piss you off?!"

The bee replied, *"Never."*

"Never?! How can you say such a thing! You must be so angry!" said the bird.

"*No, not really. Humans may be able to steal my honey...but they can never steal the art of making honey. THAT is what matters most to me."* buzzed the bee.

Pretty clever for a bee.

The bee knows that the most important thing we have can never be taken from us. Knowledge. Our own intellectual property.

When I was a student my house got robbed. I lost my laptop and my camera – things that were very expensive for me at the time. But those things don't matter so much. Because I still had the ability to use a camera. And the knowledge and skill to make the money I needed to replace what I'd lost.

Nobody, and I mean *nobody,* can ever take that.

Remember this: The best investment you can ever make is in your own knowledge and skills. That is something which will stay with you forever. Not only that, but something like English can be used *now* to make your life easier and get more of the things you need.

Money? English can help you get that.

Time? English can help you get that too. (If you've ever spent an hour composing one email, only to get a reply almost instantly you'll know what I mean.)

Energy? Getting good at English means the times you use English will be faster, easier and more efficient.

Imagine that you lose the ability to do business or sell your services in your own country. No problem – you can sell to the rest of the world. Or how about this? Imagine that you need to learn a skill, fast...let's say, Photoshop. Or let’s make it even more specific: using Photoshop to make graphic novels.

Well guess what?

There are lots of brilliant tutorials online, and if your English is good enough, you can take a course about creating graphic novels from the University of Colorado...for free, via Coursera.

Can you see now how English is not only something you can never lose, but also something you can use to change your life?

The Big “C” of Speaking Well

When I was fourteen years old, I went on something called the French exchange. A French student came and stayed at my house for two weeks, then I went and stayed at his. So it was a kind of homestay exchange.

There’s a good chance you had something like this at your school. (One of the schools I taught at many years ago had a sister-school in Australia and did an “Australian Exchange.”)

Now, when I said I wanted to do the exchange, my teachers were really surprised. I was the laziest student at the school. I didn’t study. I didn’t participate. I didn’t do anything. But when they said, *“Two weeks in France,”* I thought, *“Great! I get two weeks off school.”*

So, for totally the wrong reasons, I applied. And for some reason that I still don’t understand now, I got a place (which pretty much confirmed my suspicions that my teachers were all stupid).

Several months later – there I was, in France, with a host family who thought I was there to practise my French.

The only French I knew was, *“Bonjour,”* and for some reason *“mon petit cochon”* (my little pig). At a stretch, I could combine them to say: *“Bonjour, mon petit cochon!”*

The amazing result of three years of French education.

So what was I going to do in France? Work hard and try to learn the language? Like buggery was I. Remember – I was only there to get out of school for two weeks.

I didn’t even try.

I spent the whole two weeks speaking to my host family in English. At first they were kind of surprised…but they soon got the idea. Well, they got loads of English speaking practice, and I didn’t have to make any effort to learn French. So everybody was happy…apart from my teachers.

My host mother spoke English pretty well, but something about the way she spoke was…I don’t know…odd.

Even then I was quite aware that the way she spoke English was very different to the way that people in the UK spoke English. But it wasn't that she spoke bad English. She made mistakes with her grammar and sometimes pronounced things wrong. But those things were very minor. Rather, there was something else about her English that wasn't quite right. Not the way she said things, but *what* she said, and the assumptions that she seemed to make.

At the time I didn't really understand it, but it was like we were on a different wavelength – speaking the same language, but not really connecting. The way that people in France think is very different to the way that British people think. The values that my host family had—both cultural and personal—were quite different to my own. The result was that the way they spoke was very different to the way I spoke.

Then years later when I met my wife (who is Japanese), I noticed the same thing with her. And I noticed it again with my students after I came to Japan and started teaching English.

The way people think about improving their English tends to be too simplistic. They need to improve, so they concentrate all their time on learning words and improving their grammar. Memorising phrases and working on their pronunciation.

While these things are important, the language itself is only surface-level. Remember the LKC Triangle. You need three things to speak a language well – the Language, Knowledge of the things you want to speak about, and Culture. Culture is the "Big C" of language learning.

Put on Your Culture Glasses

Elton John supposedly owns more than 250,000 pairs of sunglasses. Whether it's a pair of standard black glasses, ones with blue, green or pink lenses, or even glasses with red heart-shaped lenses…*Elton has them*.

Clearly his face looks different depending on which glasses he wears. But importantly, the way the world looks to him also changes. Slip on a pair or red glasses, and the world looks hot and passionate. Change them for a pair with blue lenses, and the world takes on a cool-blue icy feel.

You may not have noticed, but you too are wearing a pair of tinted glasses. Unlike all the pairs Elton has, however, your glasses were put on in

the months after your birth – and they can never be taken off (not fully, anyway). I call these your “culture glasses.”

These are the lenses through which you see and understand the world. Depending on where in the world you were born and among what kind of people, you’ll have a different pair of culture glasses to someone else. Everything we see, hear, do and perceive is filtered by these glasses. And just as the world looks different when you look through a pair of green lenses compared to orange ones, the way different people understand the world is different depending on their culture.

Do you remember the story I told you right at the beginning of this book? I was at a tiny carpark-cafe in the Japanese countryside, and the lady in the cafe asked me if I could speak Japanese. I said, *"A little, but I'm still learning"*.

That was a lie, given that at that point I was working for a company and doing business in Japanese and had already worked as a translator. Clearly I knew more than "just a little". But to understand why I said this, and why boasting about my Japanese ability would have been a terrible idea, we need to consider *culture.*

Japanese culture values—above all else—modesty. Therefore, boasting about your own language skills is not the done thing. Saying, *"Yes, I speak excellent Japanese!”* would have (ironically) made me look like a beginner.

Cultural values like this run deep. Very, very deep. Japanese has a complicated social system: there are multiple levels of politeness within Japanese, and the way you speak depends on the relationship you have with the listener. For example, the word “eat” is *“taberu”* in Japanese, and if you wanted to say to a friend or co-worker “Please eat this”, you could say *“tabete kudasai”*. But if you were asking the same thing of someone with a higher social status (your boss, for example), this would be considered a little rude. Instead you’d say *“meishiagatte kudasai”*. This is a form of language called *“keigo”*, which literally means “respect language”. Similarly, if you wanted to say “I’ll eat this”, you could say *“tabemasu”*, but again, this would be a little rude if the person you’re talking to is of higher status. Instead you’d say *“itadakimasu”* – which is still the word for “I’ll eat”, but this time it’s said in a form of language called *“kenjogo”*, which literally means “humble language”.

Here’s another example about Japanese culture. Recently, Nana posted the following in the EES Community:

I've done my first ever job interview in English today. Experience drives you grow. True. Today I noticed my bad habit through the interview (actually I was told by the interviewer). When I answer questions I tend to do it in negative way. This is common for the people from certain countries like Japan. I couldn't believe how naturally I speak in negative way!

This is a perfect example of the way culture affects the way we speak. Remember: in Japanese culture, modesty and humbleness are considered very important personal traits, and when asked about their own abilities, people will play them down, and speak quite negatively about themselves. This is a problem in situations like the one Nana describes – because the interviewers are looking at the world through their own, very different cultural values.

Now, luckily for you, English doesn't have a social system nearly as complicated as Japanese. But I'm telling you about this to demonstrate how deeply connected culture and language are.

Jurate, an EES member and manager at a company in the UK, told me she needs to give feedback to her team members as part of her job. When the team member has done well, this is relatively straightforward. But what if he or she has been lazy and keeps coming to work late?

In British corporate culture, direct negative feedback is frowned upon, and it isn't appropriate to say, *"You're fucking lazy and you're doing a shit job – fix your attitude or piss off"*. Instead you're expected to communicate the same meaning using indirect, often positive language. It's not surprising that this can be quite tricky to do well (I'm not very good at it – I'm far too blunt for that). But the point is, this is a function of *culture.*

When you're obviously learning the language, people can be quite kind. They will accept your mistakes. And when you say something strange, they will think, "She didn't mean to say that." But when you start to get good, things change.

Suddenly, people can't understand why you say strange things, or make mistakes. They assume your level is beyond that, therefore you must have meant to say what you said.

Recently I heard a story about a woman who learned French. She was living in France, and every day she travelled to the same place by train to

work.

She would walk up to the ticket office window every day and say in flawless French, *“A single ticket, please.”*

She’d get the ticket and leave.

The next day, she goes to the same ticket window and asks the same person the same thing.

"A single ticket, please."

The next day the same happens. And the next.

But then on the fifth day, something shocking happens. Just as she's about to say, "A single… " the woman at the ticket window angrily says, *"Bonjour?!?!!!!"*

You see, in France, transactions such as this are supposed to start with *“Bonjour”*. Not saying it makes you seem rude. This isn't the case in English…at least not in the UK. We wouldn't bother saying *"Hello"* every time.

I heard a very similar story from someone in Canada who went to France. He speaks fluent French, but once in a shop he said, *“Excuse me…”* to ask a question, and was told, *“Bonjour!? In France, we don’t help people who are rude.”*

When it comes to simple grammar and vocabulary mistakes, people often don’t even notice. And even if they do, they don’t actually care. Cultural mistakes, on the other hand, can really upset people.

Common Knowledge Is Uncommon

Something I noticed very, very quickly after coming to Japan is that “common knowledge” is not the same thing in England as it is in Japan. A great example of this is catching a cold. In England, if you catch a cold, people don’t normally go to the doctor to get medicine.

People in Japan, however, normally do go to the doctor when they catch a cold.

Different culture, different way of doing things.

In Japan, it’s perfectly fine to ride your bike on the pavement. In the UK, a bike has to cycle on the road or in a dedicated bike lane. Again, different country, different way of doing things.

Cultural differences of this kind are important because they affect what is appropriate to say. One of the EES Weekly Lessons is called “Pedal

Power", and it's about a Japanese expat living and working in London. He decides to save money by cycling to work, and goes to a bike shop. When the shop assistant asks him, "Do you need a helmet?" the Japanese man replies, "No, I'll be perfectly fine cycling on the pavement." If he had known that it's illegal to do that, he would never have said this.

Cultural differences are also very common in working situations. In Japan, people tend to do a lot of overtime, and people who don't may even miss out on important promotions because they're viewed as not putting enough time and effort into the company. In the UK, on the other hand, if you're doing overtime on a regular basis, your boss is likely to question your ability to do your job properly and call you in to talk about what problems you might be having.

When I first started teaching at school in Japan, I had to take a one-day training course.

The training had basically nothing to do with teaching English. Instead, we were taught how not to upset the schools so that the company didn't look bad.

Fair enough, I guess. Foreign teachers in Japan are very, very good at upsetting the schools they work for (because sadly, most never bother to try and learn about Japanese culture).

The first thing I learned about (and in fact the main part of the training) was the difference between *tatemae* and *honne*.

This is how my trainer explained it: *The Japanese teachers will tell you, 'You are an amazing teacher!' But it's not true.*

Honestly. That's exactly what he said.

This is what he meant: *You will get praised…but it's a cultural thing. They feel obliged to be polite. They might say you're great even if they think you're terrible. So don't let it go to your head.*

Tatemae means something like "a person's public face" and *honne* means "a person's true feelings". In Japanese culture, it's considered important to be polite in public, even if you're not expressing your true feelings. Many Western people have a huge problem with this because they think it's shallow and fake.

On the other hand, my Japanese friends have often said that Western people come across as selfish and too full of themselves.

Neither is right nor wrong.

Both groups of people are wearing totally different "culture glasses".

Japanese culture—like many other Asian cultures—gives priority to the harmony of the group, first and foremost. It's not considered appropriate to express your personal opinions at every possible opportunity, because that might easily upset the group dynamic.

In Western societies, however, the priority tends to be placed on the individual – and people are far more concerned about expressing their own individuality than they are with preserving group harmony.

Again, neither way is right or wrong.

Just different.

The Problem of Humour

I think anybody speaking a second language has had the experience of telling a joke they thought was really funny…only to get blank stares.

I'll never forget walking to the school where I was working one rainy morning, and greeting another teacher by saying in Japanese, *"Beautiful day!"* She looked at me like I was a total idiot. Not exactly my smoothest moment with the ladies.

In the UK we like to use this kind of ironic, sarcastic language. Not so in Japan.

That humour doesn't translate well between English and Japanese is obvious (the languages are so different, after all). But what you might not know is that often humour doesn't even translate well between different English-speaking cultures, either.

I forget where I read this, but there's a great story about a British guy who'd just had a meeting with an American client. The meeting had gone really well, and afterwards they went out for a drink. The American said, *"This was a very productive day! We achieved a lot."* Then the British guy responded, *"Yeah, it was pretty good. But it would have worked out a lot better if you weren't American."* Understandably, the American client was very upset – it was a pretty stupid thing to say, after all. But in British English, this kind of dry, sarcastic joke is very normal. It's how we speak, and how we bond with people. Take a look at my Facebook profile one day and see all the horrible things my friends and I say to each other. You'd think we hated each other – but on the contrary, it's precisely because we're close friends that we speak like this.

In general, Americans tend to say exactly what they mean (not so with the British). If you think about the history of America, this makes a lot of sense. It is a country that was originally made up of immigrants from different cultures. If people didn't speak in a straightforward way, other people wouldn't have understood them. So people developed a very direct "what we say is what we mean" manner of speaking. The UK never had this problem – or at least, not to the same extent.

Japan is an island country, just like the UK. However, unlike the UK, it was closed for a very long time. The Japanese language developed while Japanese people were communicating only with other Japanese people. The result is a language totally the opposite to American English: the way people speak tends to be quite indirect and subtle, so it requires a lot of "reading between the lines." In other words, you often have to figure out what someone means by what they *don't* say. Yet people understand each other perfectly well. A language can develop this way only when everyone shares a common cultural understanding.

When it comes to humour and being funny in English yourself, my advice is: Be careful! Watch what other people do, get a feeling for the way they speak and the humour they use. Then copy that (assuming you're in the same position as them, of course – you can't copy what close friends do if you're not a close friend).

Learning Culture for Effective International English

Clearly culture is a very important part of speaking well. Indeed, it is culture that defines *what* you say.

The good news is that in order to speak really great English, you don't actually need to do much extra work.

Of course, where you can, it's good to actively learn about the cultures of people you're going to be speaking English with. If you're being sent to India on a business deal, you'd do well to familiarise yourself with Indian culture before you go. When I went to Canada not too long ago, I spent a couple of hours reading up on cultural differences between the UK and Canada. This stuff doesn't have to take a lot of time because more often than not, simply showing that you've made an effort is enough. Problems arise when you completely ignore other people's way of thinking, and expect them to conform to yours.

So most of the time, it's enough simply to be aware of how important culture is. This is a recurring theme throughout this book: it's all about *shifting your mindset.* If you're *aware* of the fact that we're all wearing these "culture glasses," you'll keep an open mind, and you'll learn to notice differences. When someone says something that you find offensive…just remember that they probably don't mean it like that. Ask yourself: "Is it possible they mean something else? Am I misinterpreting what they said?"

But of course there are things you can do to prepare yourself (and I dare say, broaden your horizons at the same time).

Reading fiction is a great way to learn about culture. For example, I recently read two separate crime fiction series – Jo Nesbo's "Harry Hole" series, and Qiu Xiaolong's "Inspector Cao" series. In a way, the two series are quite similar. They're both about detectives who investigate murders. Both main characters – Harry Hole and Chen Cao – are somewhat unconventional and odd in the way they do things. But the cultural settings of the books are totally different: Nesbo's books are set in Oslo, Norway, and very much reflect the Norwegian way of thinking and life. Xiaolong's books are set in Shanghai, China, and talk extensively about China and Chinese politics. The point is: almost any work of fiction will teach you a lot about that country's culture, simply because culture is the background for *everything* we do, and every story we tell.

You can also learn about culture from watching films. In fact, when I first started teaching at secondary school in Japan, for about six months I binged on every film and TV drama I could find that was set in schools. These made great Japanese language study materials, but more importantly, they exposed me to the culture of Japanese schools. They also gave me something to talk about with students, because often the TV shows I was watching were very popular.

Finally, of course, getting out there and doing more is going to help. Remember: Experience drives learning. So go out, experience more, notice things, and learn from your experience.

A Final Note…

This isn't something I have space to go into detail with, but being aware of a culture does not necessarily mean you will always follow it. This is something you've got to be very, very careful with—and in fact I don't

really even recommend you do this—but sometimes it is more effective to go against or *defy* the culture of the people you are talking to.

For example, in business situations I tend to ignore the social ladder that I talked about before: so I talk to people as if they were on the same level as me. I don't talk *up* to people who are socially superior, and I don't talk *down* to people who are below me on the ladder. There's a good reason for this, though. I've consistently found that I don't work well with the kind of people who easily get upset by my not using the proper "respect language." My way of working is blunt, to-the-point and totally no-bullshit. So by talking in a frank, matter-of-fact way, I effectively filter out people who are a bad fit for me.

We'll talk more about this in the final chapter, where I present an entirely new *philosophy* for using language effectively. But again, this is something you have to be very, very careful with. The important thing is: if you do break the rules, you should know what the rules are and be very aware of what you're doing. There's a big difference between someone who decides to talk in a certain way because it's effective, and someone who simply doesn't know what they're doing.

Choosing Learning Materials

Based on everything we've talked about over the last few chapters, very quickly you should see that most of the English learning textbooks and guides you get are total rubbish. Most are, essentially, word lists to study with example phrases. But can you see why this kind of thing is so…crap? Good learning materials are always going contain all three elements of the LKC Triangle. They're going to be rich in examples of real language – high frequency, high utility Type One phrases, expressions and chunks, language specific to that particular topic. They're going to contain interesting stories, experiences and information so that you can *learn something* about the topic, in addition to the language. They're also always going to contain cultural elements.

Indeed, this is exactly how I design and create the materials that EES Members get every week as part of their membership. Each lesson is designed to approach English and the LKC Triangle from a holistic viewpoint.

When you're trying to choose your own materials for studying English, you want to look for two things.

First and foremost, look for materials that are examples of real English (or at least contain real English) that real people speak, read or write.

You're also going to want to look for things which match your exact situation, your goals and your *Why.*

Things like YouTube videos, documentaries, Varity shows, and basically anything designed for native speakers (I'm sorry, but most of the stuff for English learners on YouTube really just isn't very good – which is why you never see me doing "phrase of the week" style videos any more). Films are also excellent. All of these things naturally encompass the entire LKC Triangle. Of course, if you're going to acquire language form these sources, you need to pay close attention and *study* them. Just watching a film isn't enough: you have to do something with it.

To give you an example, go back to the story I told you in Chapter 5 about when I went to the bike shop to buy a new road bike. I might go on YouTube and type into the YouTube search bar ‘buy a bike’ in Japanese (jitensha wo kau), and then find videos of people going to a bike shop, talking about bikes, bike maintenance and everything else you can imagine surrounding bikes. For me in this situation, this is going to be perfect, super useful language, because I can just pull out all of those phrases and expressions and all the things that the speaker says and just use them myself.

I want to just take the language which is already there, and just reuse it myself. These materials are going to be full of Type Two language (specific to bikes), but they’re also going to have a lot of Type One language in them too (language you can use in many different situations).

However, there are two problems here. First, sometimes you just can’t find materials that match your current situation. I’m a perfect example of this. My field of speciality is psycholinguistics and formulaic language. Guess what? You won’t find videos about psycholinguistics in Japanese on YouTube! They just don’t exist.

But don’t let this worry you. For me, this is my area of specialisation, and I already have a very deep knowledge of the topic. The *knowledge* is all there, ready to go in my head – I just need to find *language* for it. Well, most of the language I’ll use for talking about something like second-language acquisition is the same as language I’d use for anything else (Type One language). As long as I’m clear about my *Why* when I’m using other kinds of materials, language that can be used anywhere will stand out to me and I’ll think, “Ah! OK, this phrase could be used to describe what I do in my work.”

Again, this is why clarity around your goals is very, very, important. We can’t often find exact examples of language for everything that we want to do – but as long as you’re clear about your *Why*, it doesn’t matter.

This said, in my experience, most people tend to have the opposite problem. They can do their job and talk about their specialised area without too many problems – but then they struggle in casual, small-talk situations.

When I plan lessons for EES, I’m mainly concentrating on these chit-chat, small-talk situations, along with a wide variety of different topics. By doing this, I can concentrate on the most important Type One language, and then when you need language for something very, very specific, either you

need to go out and find it yourself, or you’ll need to ask for help in the Community.

Fantastic Fluency

Before we start this chapter, I need to give you a warning: *There's a good chance you've skipped to this chapter without reading the rest of the book.*

Big mistake.

Yes, yes, I know: fluency is a sexy topic. But what we talk about here builds on what we've *already* talked about in the previous chapter. And in fact, if you've taken on board the ideas from previous chapters (you're considering the LKC Triangle as a whole; you're learning in chunks and starting with examples of real, natural English), you're *already going to be building fluency faster than ever before.*

What we're talking about in this chapter will help speed up the process. But only if you've got the base right, first.

So, if you have skipped here…go back.

What Is Fluency, Exactly?

Imagine walking along the road outside your house. It's the same road you always walk along. You don't need to think about it…in fact, you're probably not aware of the road at all. The chances are you're thinking about something completely different. Day dreaming about the hot girl or guy you met the other day, your favourite band, or whatever it is that floats your boat.

Now imagine being in a foreign city that you've never been to before. New sights, sounds, lights…people everywhere. Noise. Chaos. Cars whizzing by, shop signs that you can't read.

This is a totally different experience to walking around outside your home. You're going to be disorientated, confused – hyper aware of everything around you.

Anybody who's spent time walking around new cities—especially cities like Tokyo or Hong Kong—will know how invigorating but how

utterly exhausting it can be. The first time I came to Tokyo, I was constantly confused and lost. Everything looked the same, and I couldn't find my way around. There are lights, sounds, people *everywhere* – a totally different experience to the British countryside where I grew up.

Well, fluency is like being on the road outside your home. The second situation, on the other hand, is *disfluency*.

If you remember the Four Stages of Competence that we talked about in Chapter 4, what we're talking about here is "Stage Four".

Before you ever visit an area, you're in Stage One (unconscious incompetence). Once you go there and realise you have no idea where you're going, you're in Stage Two (conscious incompetence). Then as you become familiar with the streets, you move into Stage Three (conscious competence) before finally becoming "fluent" in the lay of the land (Stage Four: unconscious competence).

Your brain works like this for a very good reason: to conserve energy. It shuts out everything that it doesn't consciously need to think about, and only lets in the information it most needs. It also automates common tasks – things like saying common phrases and expressions, and talking about topics you regularly talk about. So, when it comes to being somewhere new, well…your brain doesn't know what is important and what isn't. So it lets everything in. And this is what makes you feel confused and disoriented. As you become familiar with the area, you simultaneously store an automated route that you always follow (turn left here, walk straight, turn right at the end of the road) and block out irrelevant information (for example, there's a yellow car parked at the corner).

It's the same with English.

We're aiming to be so "fluent" in the streets of the English language that we can walk around and get where we need to go without giving it much thought. (This is a very apt metaphor for how language is represented in the brain, by the way – more on that in a moment.)

When you're not familiar with the language, you're consciously aware of what you want to say, and you're trying to calculate how to say it in your head. Nothing is automated, and there is a mess of things going on at once. This is why you feel confused and disoriented.

Incidentally, this is also why your mistakes really stand out to native speakers – they're like a big, strange, black car with blacked-out windows

parked on the street where they live. It's new, unexpected, and grabs their attention.

What's Happening in Your Brain?

There's another reason why the metaphor of roads is very appropriate. You actually have "roads" in your brain. Well, kind of, anyway. They're not actually roads. They're pathways. *Neural* pathways.

The brain is made up of billions and billions of neurons. These are basically just little cells which fire pulses of electricity at each other. Thought and consciousness emerge from the patterns that these little pulses make.

OK, yes, I realise that's an extreme simplification of how the brain works (well, how we think it works anyway…nobody really knows for sure), but you get the basic idea. What all this means, though, is that when you say a particular phrase, a particular group of neurons are firing information at each other in a specific pattern. They are connecting. And the more often they connect, the stronger the connection becomes…until eventually that path becomes fixed in the brain – a permanent pathway that can never be erased.

Imagine you use a phrase such as *'a lot of the…'* again and again. Each time you do so, you connect the same path of neurons, until eventually it becomes a single fixed path. It becomes like your route home from work: now you can travel that path more or less automatically.

Now, this is all rather complicated, and you don't really need to know this to get fluent in English. But I'm telling you because I really want you to understand how important chunks are for fluency.

Essentially, chunks are a *language habit*.

And habits are just automated routines in the brain. A habit is an action that you have taken so many times that a permanent pathway has been created in the brain, and now that action runs on autopilot.

The point is, the first step to building fluency lies in learning the right stuff. You can make bad habits just as easily as you can make good habits. We'll talk about accuracy and naturalness in detail in the next chapter (and that's all accuracy and naturalness are – good language habits). But at this point just remember that it's possible to be fluent in mistaken, unnatural English – so be careful what you practise. In the same way, you can develop

a bad habit, like smoking, which becomes something you do automatically. You become “fluent” at smoking…but that doesn’t make it a good thing!

How Do We Build Fluency, FAST?

Have you ever done any weight training? If you have, you already know how to build fluency in English.

When I started working with my personal trainer, Phil, I was amazed by the similarity between the advice he was giving me and the advice I give my students.

Then I realised: language is a muscle just like any other. So it makes sense that muscle is built in the same way that fluency is.

There’s a term in fitness called “progressive overload”. Put simply, to build muscle, you have to overload the muscle. There’s a tipping point, and it’s this tipping point that has the most effect. Say you’re lifting a weight, and your limit is 10 repetitions. The first 9 reps don’t really do much. It’s the final rep that forces your muscle to break and expand past its current capabilities. That’s when you feel the “burn.”

By overloading the muscle, you force it to grow so that it can manage the new load. Do this often enough, and over time the muscle gets bigger and stronger.

Soon you’ll find 10 reps with the same weight doesn’t do anything. The exercise has become too easy.

So what do you do?

You’ve got to overload it *more*.

You could take the same weight and lift it 20 times. But very quickly that’s going to be too easy, too – until you need to lift the weight hundreds of times to get the same effect.

Surely there’s a better way?

There certainly is – just lift a heavier weight. Now you can overload the muscle and force it to grow again with just 10 reps.

Building your fluency in a language is exactly the same. As a beginner you learned and improved fast. This is because your fluency muscle was weak, and it didn’t take much to make it grow. But over time, as you got better, the things you were doing became less and less effective. Until you reached the intermediate stage. Suddenly you found that the way you were practising English wasn’t really helping you improve anymore. It’s like

you've been lifting a weight that's far, far too light for you, hundreds and hundreds of times.

So now you need to switch to a *heavier weight* – an exercise that will apply greater intensity on your brain, and force it to process the language faster.

Incidentally, conversation schools use this to sell their "conversation lessons" very effectively.

"Just chat with a native speaker," they say, *"and you'll get fluent."*

They offer you a free trial lesson, and the first time you go, everything is new and exciting: Wow! Speaking to real live native speaker! You're nervous, and let's be honest, scared shitless of saying something stupid. You really want him to think you're English is great.

This is a very intense, high-pressure situation – which is very good practise. But of course, two or three lessons later…you're completely comfortable with your new teacher and you no longer get any benefit from chatting with him.

Suddenly every conversation is about what you did at the weekend, and you're not improving.

In our house, language gets pretty messy. I talk to my kids in English; and my daughter, at least, talks back in English. But with my wife I only speak Japanese. Not for any reason, that's just our habit. Naturally then, people often say to me, *"Well of course you're good at Japanese, Julian: you talk to your wife in Japanese all day."* But if you think about it, you'll see that this is a mistake: because, like any married couple, we tend to have the same conversations every day.

"What do you want for dinner?"

"Can you pick up some milk on your way home?"

Of course, my wife also doesn't give a crap about any mistakes I make, so they go un-corrected and ignored. (This is pretty much the same with conversation lessons by the way – most 'teachers' will be happy just to keep you talking, no matter how badly, just to get the lesson finished as painlessly as possible.)

Basically, what I'm trying to say is that there are far more effective ways to build fluency.

The Fear Factor

You've probably never heard of Danny Way.

I never had. He's the skateboarder who was the first to jump the Great Wall of China. And not only did he jump it…but he jumped it on a broken ankle (he smashed it up on the practise run).

Why do people do things like this?

It's hard to say.

I couldn't do it. And I don't want to try. But then I'm not interested in extreme sports, either.

For the people who are into extreme sports, however…it's *succeed or die*.

There is no other option.

If you go on YouTube and type in “on the roofs,” you’ll find videos by Vitaliy Raskalov & Vadim Makhorov – two Russian guys who climb stuff.

Check out the video of them climbing the Shanghai Tower. No safety equipment, nothing. Frankly, just watching the videos makes me feel physically sick. I hate—and I mean HATE—heights!

But this situation is a perfect example of performance pressure, because one wrong move…and you’re dead. There’s no two ways about it. Nobody is going to survive falling off the top of the Shanghai Tower.

The body protects itself in this kind of situation by triggering what’s known as a “flow state.” A flow state is a neurochemical cocktail of hormones that gets pumped into the brain to increase awareness; it also increases creativity and problem-solving skills. It’s designed to keep the body alive.

Now, you're probably not going to die if you make a mistake with your English. But you should think about it in the same way. There is no giving up. Just do it! Or fail trying. (In *Star Wars*, when Luke Skywalker lamely says, *“OK…I’ll give it a try,”* Yoda tells him*: “No! Try not! Do! Or do not! There is no try.”*)

The more afraid you are of doing something in English, the more you stand to gain.

One of the best books I’ve ever read is Steven Kotler’s *The Rise of Superman: Decoding the Science of Ultimate Human Performance*. The majority of the book is about extreme sports athletes—people just like Danny Way—and the science behind flow states.

Well, guess what?

In a flow state, you learn and build skills faster and more effectively, too. Including speaking extraordinary English.

As part of the EES programme, I regularly interview experts from all kinds of industries (I call this the *"Extraordinary Conversations"* series). Last year, I interviewed Richard Graham, from "Genki English".

Richard specialises in English education for primary schools, and he's learned several languages himself to fluency.

One of those languages is French. In the interview, Richard told me about when he was a teenager learning French. He was in France on holiday with his family, and his father fell sick. He had to be rushed to hospital for open heart surgery. The doctors didn't speak English. Nobody in Richard's family spoke French. In fact, Richard was the only one who knew any French at all – and suddenly he had to get good enough to communicate with the doctors. It really was a life-or-death situation.

The result?

He got very good at French, very quickly.

Another example that Richard gave is going on live TV to debate politics…in Japanese. He originally went on there to join a simple talk show, but then got invited to discuss politics. Again, this was a very high-pressure situation – there was a very high risk of major embarrassment.

The result?

He got good at Japanese really, really quickly.

Now, it's unlikely that you will find yourself in these exact situations. I certainly hope you never find yourself in the situation where a loved one has to have open heart surgery in an English-speaking country…or anywhere else, for that matter. But it would be really good for improving your English! The point is: *we can and should figure out how to engineer the same kind of pressure, the same kind of high intensity, into our everyday learning.*

Exercises for Building Fluency

What is pressure, exactly? What does it mean for something to have pressure? What does it mean for something to be high-intensity? And how can we replicate that in a situation that is in reality quite low-risk?

Most of the ways that you practise English are low-risk. There's very little chance of your dying because you make a grammar mistake, which,

while great for survival, isn't so great for building fluency fast.

We can, however, simulate the effect.

Pressure ultimately comes down to two things: pressure to perform well, and pressure to perform fast. The examples from Richard above include both of these things.

In extreme sports, pressure to perform means pressure not to die. But it can also just as easily mean things like not embarrassing yourself and looking like a total idiot in front of people (which is the case with Richard going on Japanese live TV, debating politics in a second language).

So the goal then is to build these two things into your daily practice, in order to create these high-intensity, high-adrenaline situations.

Timer Challenges

The first and simplest way to build pressure into your English practice is to use a kitchen timer.

There are loads of ways you can do this, both with practice exercises, and with the things that you do every day anyway. For example, you can pick a topic and speak about it for 30 seconds – set the timer and aim to say everything that you need to say before the alarm rings. (I'll discuss a more advanced version of this below.)

One of the best exercises for improving your listening skills and noticing things about language is dictation. Listen to a conversation in English, and write out everything you hear. This forces you to pay attention to every little sound in the language so that you can write down what you hear. Dictation is a very intense exercise anyway. But you can make it even more intense by using a timer. Give yourself, say, 20 minutes to listen to and completely write out a 2-minute conversation. This is very, very tiring…but extremely effective for building listening fluency.

I like to set a timer and challenge myself to finish reading a chapter of a book in that time. Or I might challenge myself to copy out from a book by hand (this is especially useful for me because Japanese uses complex Chinese characters).

Speed up Your Everyday Work

You can (and should) also use a timer with day-to-day activities that you do in English. For example, when I write blog posts or my "Doing English Daily Newsletter" (see the Resources section if you don't know what this is), I set a timer for 5 minutes. It forces me to focus and helps the words to flow. And yes, I'm using a timer to write this book! I like to challenge myself to write or edit a section in a specified amount of time. For this "exercises" section, I've challenged myself to write the first draft in 33 minutes.

One of the biggest time-wasters for all of us is email. I hate having a full inbox of emails to reply – especially when a lot of those emails are long, rambling, and seem to have no real point.

For non-customer emails, I give people 30 seconds per email. That means I read the email and reply it in 30 seconds. If I reach 30 seconds and I haven't finished reading it, I delete it. If I reach 30 seconds and I haven't finished replying it, I delete it.

This forces me to focus and reply quickly. Work expands to fill the time available, and if you've got 30 minutes to reply an email, then you could easily spend 30 minutes and still not finish it. This also trains other people to be short and concise with their emails, because they know that if it's a long-winded email, I'm not going to finish reading it, and they're not going to get a reply. But most importantly here, you're forcing the brain to work faster, you're putting pressure on yourself, and that's going to help you build fluency much, much more effectively.

The 432 Technique

Really, this is the same 'timed speaking' technique as I mentioned above, but it's a little more complicated, so it gets its own section.

To do the 432 exercise, all you need is a topic you want to speak about, and a timer.

Take the topic you want to speak about, and talk about it for 4 minutes. Then reset your timer and try to cover the same content again, but now in 3 minutes. Finally, aim to do the same thing in 2 minutes.

This does a couple of things. First, it forces you to be concise with your English. Second, it forces you to think in English and speak without hesitating. You can't say something which took 4 minutes in just 2 minutes if you are spending a lot of time thinking about each sentence.

You can find a demonstration of this exercise in the online resource area included with this book.

How I Became a Great Speaker

When I record videos such as the ones you see on my YouTube channel, in the EES community, podcasts and the like, I don't have to think about them at all. I just turn on the camera and speak. But it wasn't always like this.

When I first started YouTube almost 10 years ago, my videos were terrible – even in English (my first language). I couldn't speak clearly or smoothly, and paused a lot, said, "ummmm" and "ahhhh" all the time, and the videos I made were very confusing because I didn't explain myself well.

Seeing my own videos, I became aware of things that I wasn't explaining well and things I didn't like about my speaking. And naturally, over time, I got better and better at it. But the funny thing is, as my YouTube videos improved – so did my speaking in other situations.

I highly recommend starting a YouTube channel, in English. At first your videos will suck – and that's fine. But with practice you'll find your videos get better and better as your speaking skills and fluency improve.

Also, because YouTube videos are public—out there for the world to see—this gives you massive performance pressure: You don't want to be embarrassed by putting up bad videos. This is quite an uncomfortable thing to do, but very, very effective.

Do It in Public

You can also make your videos outside, in public.

This is very, very hard to do in the beginning unless you are already very confident. But remember: the more it terrifies you, the more you're going to learn from the experience.

When I filmed the very first version of Two Step Speaking, I didn't have a studio to film in, let alone equipment such as lights. So I went to my local park with my hand-help camera and filmed there, in the sun. There was one video where a crowd of school boys gathered to watch me. It was, to be honest, quite embarrassing, but by the end of filming the course I totally didn't care anymore.

Of course, once it stops being scary, it stops being so useful for building fluency. But hey…it’s really, really great for confidence. And anyway: if you're at a point where you can stand in front of a group of people who have no idea who you are, recording videos of yourself speaking in a second language, then you’ve come very far indeed!

Speaking Accurately and Naturally

Everybody says they want to be more fluent in English. But just being fluent is not enough. Shit English said fluently is still shit English, right?

Alongside building fluency, you also need to work on building accuracy and "naturalness".

First though, let me repeat what I said in the previous chapter: if you've skipped here without reading the previous chapters (especially Chapter 6 on chunking), you're wasting your time. On the other hand, if you've done everything else well, building naturalness is actually pretty easy.

What we're talking about here simply speeds up the process and makes improving your English even faster and more effective.

It's like taking an already excellent sports car and fitting it with better tires – but of course, just having the tires without the car is pointless.

What Is Accuracy and Naturalness?

We said that *fluency* is like walking along the road outside your house. It's knowing the roads so well, that you can just walk along them, drive along them, cycle along them…whatever your favourite mode of transport, without having to think about it.

Disfluency, on the other hand, is like being in a foreign city where everything is new, and you're disoriented and confused and you don't know where you're going, and you're hyper-aware of everything going on around you.

We can continue this metaphor here. Speaking with naturalness and accuracy is like being familiar with the roads, but also knowing what is the quickest, most efficient route from Point A to Point B.

A great example of this: I often cycle to my mother-in-law's house. My mother-in-law lives on completely the opposite side of Tokyo to me, and

it’s about a 25-kilometre bike ride. But it’s a fairly easy route; it takes me about 45 minutes to an hour.

I can go this fast because it’s basically straight all the way. However, I don’t *have* to take that route. I could take a completely different route if I wanted to. I could start by cycling in the opposite direction, then go all the way around the city. That however is not an efficient route. Sure, it will get me there. And I could practise that route until I know it so well I don’t have to think about it. But it’d still be a crappy route to take.

Speaking with naturalness and accuracy then is using the shortest, most efficient way to communicate the things that you want to say. And this means speaking in chunks.

We already talked about this, but what does and does not sound natural is not really logical. “Pleasant first half of the day to you!” is a perfectly grammatical thing to say. Only it sounds weird, because the chunk we *expect* in this situation is “Good morning”. Naturalness is all to do with people’s expectations – people expect common, highly predictable chunks.

Remember what I said about the human brain? It’s lazy and desperately wants to save as much energy as possible. In conversation, chunks help you, the speaker, to speak fluently. Because they are automatic and don’t need to be constructed from grammar rules and individual words, they are very, very efficient. Your brain can just pull them out of memory and use them, as they are, ready to go.

It’s exactly the same for the listener. When someone is listening to you, they are able to understand you by accessing the chunks already stored in their memory. If you speak in natural chunks, they can understand you without making any special effort.

If you ask a native speaker to complete the phrase: *“At the end of the _____”*, everyone knows it’s “day”, although “night”, “road” or “snake’s tail” are also perfectly grammatical. “At the end of the day” is a chunk – the others are not.

What Grammar Really Is

Grammar didn't come first – language did. One day, some clever people called “linguists" sat down and analysed the language they heard. They tried to pull out patterns and make rules to explain the language.

They did an OK job.

Probably they did the best job they could. But it’s not very good, to be honest. First, there are too many exceptions. No rule describes everything, so there are always some things that don’t fit. Second, native speakers don’t always speak “correctly” according to the rules of grammar. Third, language is so complex that it’s difficult to explain grammar in a way that’s useful for people learning the language.

Grammar rules can be useful. But only when you use them in the right way. Unfortunately, as we already talked about in Chapter 6, the way most schools teach languages is totally backwards. They start with grammar rules, teach you individual words, and then expect you to produce language from these materials.

Remember: always start with samples of real, natural English: whole sentences or paragraphs. You read or listen to it and get the basic idea, as a whole. Then you can take it apart, analyse the grammar and look up some vocabulary words. Never do it in the opposite direction: don’t start with individual words and grammar rules.

Don’t misunderstand me: studying grammar rules *can* be useful. You’ve just got to use them in the right way. Use them to understand the language that you hear real people speaking; use them to notice things about English.

Now, there is a problem with this: the way native speakers use language (especially in speaking) isn’t always grammatical.

Here’s an example. I once sent an email where I wrote "there's people". A blatant grammar mistake. Tsk tsk. Bad boy Julian. Yes, I know.

In reply, someone sent me an email saying:

> *Mistake: There's no people outside*
>
> *Correction: There are no people outside*

Yes, I should be more careful. A mistake is a mistake, whatever. But there is an interesting lesson here.

Interesting, but very, very controversial. So read this with an open mind, OK?

In your grammar book you would have learnt to use the verb *is* before or after a singular noun, and *are* before or after plural nouns.

So not "There is people", but "There are people". Right? Well yes...kind of. That is the “correct” usage, yes. But if you look at real language that real people speak, you’ll find out some very interesting things about this “incorrect” chunk of language.

You see, native speakers rarely speak like grammar books say they should. In fact, a lot of the time they don't speak in a grammatical way at all.

I looked up "there's people" in a huge data bank of American English, and compared it with the grammatically correct phrase "there’re people".

Guess what I found?

“There’s people” is significantly more frequent than “there’re people”.

So I looked it up again in a data bank of British English.

Guess what?

We see the same pattern again: the incorrect “there’s people” is significantly more common.

So although, yes, "there’re people" is correct according to grammar books…in reality? It's only correct in grammar books. Because it doesn't reflect the way people actually use language. Put simply, here the ungrammatical, “mistaken” chunk is more common, easier to say and easier to understand.

So is the phrase "there's people" *really* a mistake? I would say NO.

Now, don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying you should learn "incorrect English". I still advise you to learn the grammatically correct version – “there’re people”.

But the point I want to make is this: Don’t assume that the grammar rules you learn are perfect and always right. Doing that will leave you very frustrated, because in the real world you’re going to see lots of examples that don’t match the rules.

Also don’t assume you know better or that you are definitely right. Living and working in Japan, I occasionally come across people who are not able to do anything useful with their English, but still they have a weird kind of pride about their grammatical knowledge. And they take every opportunity they can to humiliate native speakers with it (especially English teachers, to whom they love to say things like, "If you're a teacher, why don't you know this?!"). This is small-minded stupidity at its best. And totally pointless.

Grammar rules are ***never*** simply 'right' or 'wrong'. They should be understood and used in a flexible way – as *guidelines* for understanding language.

What should you focus on instead?

Meaning. Read or listen to samples of language that real people use. Begin your study by trying to understand *the meaning* of the sample as a whole. Then you can use grammar rules and a dictionary to help you understand the details.

The Big "N" of Naturalness

There was a house on the street corner near where I used to live. I walked past that house every day for years.

Then one day it was gone.

I went away for the weekend, and when I walked past on Monday morning, the corner was just a patch of bare ground. The house had totally vanished. This isn't unusual in Tokyo. Houses go up and come down fast. They're made of wood, and it doesn't take much to knock them down.

The strange thing is though…*no matter how hard I think now, I have no idea what that house looked like.*

What colour were the walls? What kind of door did it have? What shape was the roof?

I walked past it for years, but I can't remember. Why? Because I never actually paid attention to that house. It was there, in the background. But I never really *noticed* it. Not until it was gone, anyway.

Exercises for Building Accuracy and Naturalness

We can't learn what we never notice.

Take the mistakes you make with your English, for example. If you never notice the mistakes you're making, you'll never be able to correct them.

So the exercises and ideas below are all "awareness building" exercises. They are designed to get you noticing things about your own English performance.

But remember the point I made earlier: by far the best way to *speak* smooth, natural-sounding English is to *learn from* smooth, natural-sounding

English. And you do that by starting with samples of real language and by concentrating on *chunks.*

Getting Quality Feedback from Other People

The most obvious way to identify problems with your English is to get feedback and critique from other people. Obvious, yes. But it works.

A while ago I read an interesting story about Coca-Cola. I don't know if it's true (it sounds like an urban myth to me), but it illustrates a good point.

In 1886, John Pemberton invented Coca-Cola...then two years later, he died. A guy called Asa Candler bought the rights to Coca-Cola, and worked hard marketing it. Soon it became a popular drink. But not as popular as it could be.

At that time Coca-Cola was sold as a syrup to shops, who then mixed it and sold cupped drinks.

Then one day a man walked into the Coca-Cola office and said, *"I can teach you how to double the company's profits overnight."*

"If you want my advice, it will cost you $5000," he said.

That was a huge amount of money at the time. But Candler paid him the money. In return, he got a slip of paper with two words written on it: "Bottle it". And that, apparently, is how Coca-Cola started to be sold in bottles.

The point is this: Sometimes the biggest breakthroughs are extremely simple, plain, and…well, kind of obvious. But it often takes another person with fresh eyes to *notice* them.

Candler was so focused on selling more syrup to shops that he didn't notice the obvious alternative: Why not sell bottles of the drink straight to consumers?

Similarly, you probably make the same mistakes with your English again and again and again. And you have no idea you're doing it. You're probably so focused on a certain aspect of English that you miss the obvious breakthrough.

As part of the EES programme, I give people feedback and critique on their English. Basically, they record a short video talking about a topic they need to get good at, and I give my typical blunt commentary on their performance.

Feedback and critique from other people can be very valuable, and it's a great way to improve…*fast*. Be careful, though: Often the feedback you get is not very high-quality.

You see it all the time.

The person doing the corrections just wants to get it done fast. So they fix your grammar. But the language still sounds weird, unnatural…and may not even make sense.

I'm not going to name any specific sites, because it's not fair to slag off other business in my book. But there are quite a few social-media style websites and services out there where you can submit something written in English and have other users correct your mistakes.

It's a good idea, and it sounds great…but in reality, more often than not, it isn't.

I used to use one such website and get loads of corrections on my Japanese – which felt great! But then my wife would look at the corrections people gave me and say: *"That sounds strange…!"*

You see, the problems I had (and which most people have) are usually "higher level" problems. It's a higher level problem when we say something unnatural, weird, or culturally inappropriate. Or when we say something that makes no sense. But most people who give corrections only give quick, low-level grammar corrections. They ignore the real, higher-level problems which are much harder to correct.

Ultimately, you learn nothing valuable from the process. Yes, you get back something that's grammatical…but just correcting the grammar of a sentence doesn't make it a good sentence.

Weird language constructed grammatically is still weird language. "Have a good first half of the day!" is grammatically correct, but it sure sounds weird. In this case, you need to learn the equally grammatical but much more natural chunk: "Good morning!"

Below I describe the process we use in EES when someone requests feedback and critique on their English. You can (and should) use this process yourself. If you're an EES member, obviously you can just get me to do your critique. But if not, you can still use the same process: you just need to find someone you trust who can give you their really blunt, no-bullshit opinion. The process is simple:

(1) Decide what you want to talk about.

(2) Record a video 1 to 2 minutes long of you speaking in English about that topic. Of course you can go longer than 2 minutes, but the longer the video is, the harder it is to get good, detailed feedback. You might also record yourself doing the 432 Exercise explained above.
(3) Watch the video yourself several times. Do you notice any mistakes? Is there anything you didn't know how to say? If yes, look up the things you wanted to say, and fix your own mistakes by re-recording. Watch it again.
(4) Make a list of weak points and strong points. What are the things you like about your English? What are the things you don't like? What are the things you want to change?
(5) Next get someone to watch your video. Tell them what you think are the weak points and the strong points. Ask them to be critical, and brutally honest – no being nice! Ask them first to give feedback on the overall video. Does what you say make sense? Are you easy to understand? Is everything you say appropriate? How's your body language? Next get them to correct your mistakes and give you more natural phrases if you need them.
(6) Follow up! There's no point in doing all this work and then just saying, "Oh, OK. Thanks," and then never doing anything. You've actually got to fix the problems. If the person giving you feedback says that the way you told your story was confusing, work on the story to make it easier to understand. If they point out grammar mistakes… make sure you practise again and again and again – as many times as you have to, until saying the correct thing becomes automatic for you.

Doing this can be very, very uncomfortable. Painful, even. You're being forced to judge yourself negatively, after all – then you're having someone else criticise you and your English.

But if you do this and it's *not* bloody painful – then most likely you aren't working hard enough. As they say in weight training: "No pain, no gain."

The Video Diary

By now you know that recording videos of yourself speaking English is a very good way to build both fluency and accuracy. I already talked about

the idea of starting a YouTube channel as a way to practise your English in the previous chapter – and here I'm going to reiterate the point.

YouTube changed my life.

Not many people know this now, but I started a YouTube channel all the way back in 2008. Sadly, that channel got deleted, and all the videos with it. It wasn't in English, either. It was in Japanese.

At the time I was teaching English at secondary school, and I wanted to learn how to teach in Japanese.

The way I did this was to get English learning audio lessons, taught in Japanese (i.e., lessons designed for Japanese people learning English); then I studied the explanations and how the presenters talked about English. To practise, I then made videos of myself explaining English phrases in Japanese.

Some of my videos got quite popular (nothing compared to my channel now, though), so I started a second channel in English based on a blog I was already doing (the original version of Doing English – which was actually a teaching diary).

Making videos transformed the way I speak. It did amazing things for my Japanese…but also for my English. Thanks to doing YouTube videos, I'm much more confident speaking in front of people than I used to be. I also feel like I explain things much more clearly than I used to.

Do you remember the metaphor I used for fluency and accuracy?

Well, when I first started YouTube, and was first talking about teaching and learning English, I felt like I was lost in a foreign city. I hadn't developed my stories, and I didn't know how to explain things clearly.

Over time, and with each new video, I got better and better at speaking. I got a feel for the best, simplest ways to explain difficult concepts, and I started to collect stories, anecdotes and examples that I could use in my videos.

Effective Speaking Made Dead Simple

This book isn't for people who want to speak well. It's for people who want to be outstanding. *Extraordinary.* And in order to do that, we need to go beyond English.

I often hear students say: "My goal is to speak English like a native speaker." But although native speakers do speak English fluently without having to give it much thought, they are not necessarily outstanding speakers. To be honest, they may not even be good speakers.

This should be obvious from the fact that you need three things to speak English well – not only the Language, but also Knowledge of your topic, and sensitivity to the Culture. That's the LKC Triangle, which you already know all about…but which many native speakers don't.

Now I want to introduce you to the EAR Philosophy. This is a set of guidelines, or principles, which you can use to present yourself to the world, through English, for the maximum result. Many native speakers have no idea how to do this.

These principles have served as very effective guidelines for me in any kind of communicative situation – any situation where I need to make decisions, whether it's in my business or in my personal life; whether I'm having a conversation with someone one-on-one, whether I'm talking to people as part of a group, whether I am talking to a group, as in a presentation or a speech, whether I'm making a video to go on my YouTube channel, or for one of my courses.

In a nutshell, The EAR Philosophy advises us always to be Empathetic, Authentic, and Relentless in our pursuit of outstanding English.

Here's how I explain it:

- Be Empathetic: Always show empathy and understanding for other people. This means: aim to truly understand the people you interact with, the people in your life, the groups of people that you associate

with. Ask people questions, listen to people, try to learn everything you can about them. Study human psychology, the human condition. Watch people, watch how they act, how they behave. Learn as much as you can about people.

- Be Authentic and true to yourself: Share your full self with the world – not just the things that you're confident and comfortable with, but also the things that you're not confident about, and the things you're uncomfortable with. Share these things with the world anyway. Don't worry about the opinions of other people – the people who are not like you, who are fundamentally different from you. Forget about them, ignore them. Concentrate all of your time and energy on the people who matter to you, the people who are important to you. Form strong, authentic relationships with those people.
- Be Relentless: Keep pushing to become the best possible version of yourself that you can be. Never give in when you know something truly matters. Never be satisfied with half-assed efforts and mediocre results.

Now let's discuss these three elements of the EAR Philosophy in detail and talk about how they can serve you in your life, starting with the 'E' for Empathy.

E – Empathy

"If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle."

Sun Tzu, the Art of War

You already know this by now, but a long time ago I was a secondary school teacher. In any class, there are always trouble students – the ones

who don’t listen, who talk back, and who generally make their teacher’s life difficult.

Sometimes you’ll come across students who *really* have problems. Many teachers—especially foreign English teachers—sadly don’t deal with those students well.

They tell them things like: “You need English for your future,” and in some cases they get angry and shout at students. But they never think to ask *why* a student misbehaves.

Well, I asked why.

And I can tell you…the answers I got (normally from the child’s home room teachers, not from the students themselves) were pretty fucking scary.

There are children in schools who have serious problems at home. Their dad beats them. Their mum brings strange men home every night. There are girls who are scared of being raped by step-fathers and boys who are abused every day.

And teachers mindlessly tell them to concentrate on their English?

Yeah, right.

The point is, you can’t deal effectively with a problem—whether it’s a problem student or a difficult business deal—until you have all the information.

You need to take the time to understand the people you work with.

When in doubt, shut up and listen.

There’s an old cliché that my grandmother often used to repeat: “You have two ears and one mouth – use them in that proportion.” That means: Spend twice as much time listening as you do talking.

One of the best ways to avoid making mistakes, or sounding daft when you speak, is to listen instead. Ironically, people who spend more time listening are generally considered better speakers by the people they spend time with…and there’s a good reason for this.

First, people like to be listened to.

More importantly though, people who listen to others understand people better – and when you understand someone, you’re able to use language and communicate much more effectively.

You’ve probably met people in your life whom you like talking to just because they seem to *understand* you. It’s like they understand what you want to say, even without your having to say it. There’s a connection. This means that person has *empathy* for you.

Aim to be that kind of person: the one other people feel they connect with.

The dictionary defines 'empathy' as *"The ability to understand and share the feelings of another."*

Become a student of people. Aim to understand people on a very deep level. Really listen to the people you interact with on a regular basis.

This is especially important in sales situations.

A great example of this is one that you've probably experienced yourself: going into a clothing shop. Not long ago, I was shopping for a new jacket. In the first shop I went into, the assistant recommended a jacket without even asking me anything. He told me it would suit me…but in what situation? Who knows. This jacket was also clearly one they were trying hard to sell. There was a display right in front of the shop, and all the main displays included this jacket.

Clearly he wanted to sell the jacket for his own reasons; he didn't really care who bought it, or whether it was the right thing for them to buy.

His final attempt was to tell me: "Your colleagues at work will be really jealous when they see you in this jacket!"

Big mistake.

First, I'm self-employed and don't have any colleagues. Second, even if I did, I wouldn't give a shit what they thought.

Now, compare this to shop number two. There, the assistant asked me a few questions – where would I wear the jacket? What purpose was it for?

I told him I make online courses and work with entrepreneurs online helping them to do stuff with their English.

The jacket he recommended wasn't one I would have picked myself. It's navy blue, and made of a rough, but fine wool which doesn't have a sheen. Great under strong studio lights. It's also very fitted, he explained, because jackets tend to look wider than they really are on camera, especially when I'm sitting down.

I bought the jacket, and I love it.

So whereas shop assistant number one just irritated the hell out of me, shop assistant number two sold me a fairly expensive jacket.

All because he took the time to ask me a couple of questions and because he listened to what I wanted.

Speaking well is about *strategy*, not *tactics*. In sales, someone who uses *tactics* is trying to turn every single encounter into a sale – right here,

right now. But someone who uses a *strategy* is looking at the bigger picture – trying to develop good relationships with people over the long term. The first sales assistant was all about tactics. The second had a strategy. Even if I didn't buy a jacket that time, it's the kind of store I would go back to again and again, because of the way he treated me.

Every time I've ever rented an apartment in Tokyo, I hear the same line from the realtor: *"I shouldn't tell you this, but there was another couple who came to look at this same apartment today, and I think they're going to take it."*

At the time of writing this, I'm looking around for a place to buy. My wife and I are looking for an older property that we can reform. Some of the places we've looked at have been on the market for years – and *still* we get the same line!

Total bullshit.

Compare that with the realtor who sat down with us over a coffee, got all our details, then called back two months later because he'd found a place he thought we'd like. Ultimately, we decided the place was a little small for us, but the point is: this realtor had a very clear (and effective) strategy.

He knew we wouldn't find something quickly, so he didn't bother wasting our time with things that weren't right for us, or with fake pressure tactics. Instead, he waited for something that actually was right for us, and he showed us that.

Business, marketing, sales, speaking English well – it's all about empathy. The better you understand your audience, the better you'll be.

There are so many people in the world who want to speak "intelligent" or "sophisticated" English. They spend all their time memorising clever-sounding words, then they try to use them whenever they can, hoping to impress people. That's a tactic. And not a very good one. They never take the time to understand the person they're talking to, so more often than not they just seem weird, not intelligent.

One of the best ways to understand people is simply *to ask questions*. Ask people things, learn about the people that you talk to and interact with – not just the new people that you meet, but the people you've known all your life. Ask them things, try to learn new things about those people all the time. Ask them questions and then sit back, shut up and just listen.

A – Authenticity

In 2007, two Scottish guys launched a brewing business that would transform the beer industry in the UK.

James Watt, co-founder of BrewDog, put some of their home-brewed beer into a Tesco competition. Shortly after, they got a phone call telling them they'd won first, second, third and fourth prize. Not only that, but Tesco wanted to roll out their beer – 2000 cases a week.

Tesco had no idea BrewDog consisted of just two people who were hand filling bottles from a tent, with their dog.

In just a couple of years, BrewDog grew to become one of the fastest-growing food and drink companies in the UK, with more than 500 employees, 44 bars worldwide, and a turnover in excess of £20 million in 2013.

How did they do it?

First of all, pure guts. But much more than that.

BrewDog didn't just create a product.

The created an entire culture. They broke all the rules. The beer they make is totally different to any other beer you can buy. And their way of doing business is totally different to any other, too.

BrewDog are punks of the beer world and they've created a brand that is totally unique and resonates with the right kind of people for them.

On one level, being authentic seems quite simple. Just be yourself. However, when you really think about what it means to be authentic, you start to realise that it's actually quite an elusive idea. You start to notice that this concept of being yourself, of authenticity, is actually quite puzzling. And it's quite hard to pin down exactly what it means to be authentic.

Being authentic means being confident and comfortable with yourself, and confident and comfortable with sharing yourself to the outside world. Not just the good things. But everything. It means being comfortable and confident with being vulnerable, showing the less positive aspects of ourselves, the things that we are not so proud of. It means being comfortable saying, *"I was wrong, I made a mistake, I'm not perfect, I don't know everything, I am still learning, I make mistakes."*

It also means not doing things just because other people think you should.

My work is a perfect example.

I mostly work with people who use English in the world of international business, whether they are employed by a company or they

own the company.

The biggest mistake most business English teachers make when they market themselves is putting on a suit and trying to fit in with the "corporate" image they imagine their clients have.

If that's how they're truly comfortable…then fine.

But I look stupid in a suit and tie, and nothing—and I mean nothing—would get me to carry one of those horrible leather briefcases that most businessmen carry.

I'm pretty casual in the way I present myself, and the way I speak — I'm not afraid to say *shit*, *fuck* and *bollox* in front of my clients.

In short, just like BrewDog are totally different to any other brewing company in the UK, I'm totally different to what you'd expect a *business English* teacher to be.

And that's exactly why I make a lot more money than your average business English teacher. Because I've got guts, and I'm not afraid to show my full personality.

Ultimately, people do business with people they know, like, and trust.

And intuitively we don't trust people who try to be something they're not.

But here's the important thing: not everybody likes me. Quite the opposite, lots of people *don't* like me. And that's a good thing. A very, very good thing.

There's a concept in marketing known as "polarisation."

Political campaign planners are masters of polarisation. A fantastic example is the whole Brexit thing that happened in the UK, with the UK leaving the European Union, and the run-up to that.

The campaigns from both parties took everybody from this vague, general middle and polarised them, splitting them into two very clear, very distinct groups. You were either in, or you were out.

People in one group absolutely could not understand the feelings and thinking of people in the other group.

Donald Trump did exactly the same thing.

So did Marmite with their "You either love it or you hate it" advertisements. And of course, so did BrewDog. Not everybody likes BrewDog beer — but the people who do, *love it*.

This is polarisation at its most extreme. But when you start to share your real self, all of yourself, everything about yourself, with other people,

you have the same effect on them.

Some people will be very strongly drawn to you, as if attracted by a super-powerful magnet. These people are people who are fundamentally like you, people who are similar to you, who share the same ideals, people who have empathy for you, people who can accept you for who you truly are.

In the same way that a magnet can draw things towards it, when flipped over, a magnet also repels other things. So if you're authentic and true to yourself, some people are *not* going to like you. Some people will be pushed away, repelled. These are people who are fundamentally different to you, people who are not like you, people who do not share your ideals, people who cannot accept you for who you truly are.

The stronger the magnet is, the stronger the attraction will be, *and* the stronger it will push other things away.

You might think that this is a negative thing. We don't want to be disliked, we don't want to be rejected. However, herein lies the problem: you can never please everyone, and when you try to, actually you please no one.

It's the difference between a person who has a small group of friends prepared to die for them, compared with another person who has hundreds of friends, but no one he can truly rely on.

There's a great scene in Nancy Meyers's film "The Intern".

Ben—a retired 70-year-old—applies for an intern position. Right from the start, he's very careful about what he wears. Classic suits, attention to detail, and always with a handkerchief.

He gets the job, and people comment on his clothes.

"Hey Ben, you gonna wear a suit every day?"

"You bet," replies Ben.

"*Confidence! I like how you roll,*" comes the reply.

The boss even tells him he doesn't need to dress up for the job: "*Don't feel like you have to dress up… we're super casual here."*

"I'm comfortable in a suit, thank you," again replies Ben.

Here's the thing though – Ben stands out. He dresses well in an environment where everybody dresses super casual, and as a result he turns heads.

He is authentic, and true to himself… and doesn't change himself just because of what other people say.

Researchers at Harvard University did a study about fashion. More precisely, about how people perceive others based on the way they dress.

And the result?

People who dress “unusually” get a lot more respect than people who are "well dressed”.

Lady Gaga is a perfect example.

Her fashion sense is very unusual, and it gets noticed. But also people like Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg are perfect examples. CEOs of huge, major companies, you'd expect them to be sitting around “properly dressed.” But while everyone else is at the meeting in their business suits...they're in jeans and t-shirts.

Another example is people who go to high-end fashion boutiques dressed in gym clothes. Shop assistants know that it’s these people who are likely to spend a lot of money (and not the people who come “appropriately” dressed).

The message is clear – casual confidence impresses.

And you know what?

That's exactly the same with English, and the way you speak. The people who get the most success are the people who "wear" their English in a totally casual, comfortable, natural way.

This doesn’t mean you have to be crazy like Lady Gaga, of course. It just means stop caring what people think of you. Be yourself, and be comfortable with yourself.

When you do this, the quality of people you draw to you and your work will be much higher. And the people who aren’t right for you…well, they can just fuck off.

R – Relentless

Have you ever seen the film *Rocky*?

If you’ve never seen it, I highly recommend you go and watch it.

Written and acted by Sylvester Stallone, *Rocky* is one of the most successful films in history. But what a lot of people don’t realise is the challenges and hardships that Stallone faced to make that film.

When he first came to New York to become an actor, no one would hire him. He was so poor that he had to sleep in the New Jersey bus terminal.

This was the lowest point of Stallone's life. But one day he saw the boxer Muhammad Ali, and it gave him the idea for a story. He put pen to paper and wrote the script for the film *Rocky*.

He took the script to a producer and was offered 125,000 dollars for it. But there was a condition: the producer said that he didn't want Stallone to act in the film. But Stallone didn't want to be a screenwriter, he wanted to be an actor. So he refused.

Can you imagine that? Here's this guy, completely broke, sleeping on the street and he's offered 125,000 dollars… but he refuses it.

A few weeks later, the producer comes back, and this time he offers Stallone 350,000 dollars – an incredible sum of money. But still he says Stallone can't act in the film. Stallone says, "No thank you."

Eventually the producer gives in and says that Stallone can act in the film, but he'll only pay 35,000 dollars – just 10 percent of what he previously offered. Stallone accepted, and the rest, as they say, is history.

The point of this story is that when you truly want something, don't let anything stop you. Be relentless in your pursuit of that goal. Never give up. Keep on trying.

No matter how difficult things seem, no matter how many hardships and challenges you face be relentless in the pursuit of the things that truly matter to you.

Stallone didn't want to be a screenwriter; he wanted to be an actor. The thing that truly mattered to him—his *Why*—was acting. He was relentless in the pursuit of his goal, and was eventually successful because he was so relentless.

Rocky was the starting point of a very long, very successful career for Sylvester Stallone. Imagine if he'd given in and settled for the producer's first offer? Where would he be now?

The same attitude will serve you well when speaking English. Your English skills (or lack of them) should never, ever be an excuse not to do the things you know matter.

If something seems hard… try anyway. And if it doesn't work, ask what you need to do to improve yourself to *make* it work. But never—and I mean *never*—be satisfied with half-assed efforts and mediocre results.

Right back in the introduction to this book, I told you how I came to Japan. I had a job interview lined up for a great position at an art gallery in Harajuku, a fashionable part of Tokyo.

I was so sure I'd get the job, but I didn't. My Japanese wasn't good enough.

It's funny, but although I didn't realise it then, that wasn't the first time a second language had held me back and stopped me from doing the things I wanted to do.

Remember what I told you in Chapter 1 about how I believed I *couldn't* learn a language? How I believed I wasn't talented at languages?

While I was in my first year at university, I was offered a chance to go to Switzerland for three months. I would study at a university there, all expenses paid. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity. But at the last minute, I turned it down.

I made all kinds of excuses as to why I couldn't go, but the reality was that I was *afraid*. I was scared of being in an environment where I couldn't speak the language.

There were so many times I wanted to quit Japanese, too. After I was turned down by the art gallery, I got a job as an assistant English teacher working in a school. I enjoyed the teaching, but I *hated* all of the other work I had to do such as planning lessons with teachers and joining meetings.

I felt embarrassed about my bad Japanese. I felt humiliated almost every day. The other teachers were busy and always seemed annoyed at having to deal with me – the guy who couldn't speak their language properly. When I had to join meetings I had lots of ideas, but I didn't understand what people were saying. I was afraid of saying something stupid, so I always just sat in silence, nodding and agreeing with everything if asked a question.

It would have been so easy to just give up and go back to England. But I'm so glad that I didn't. Because if I had… if I'd given up just like I gave up on Switzerland… I wouldn't have the life that I have now.

Once I realised why my Japanese wasn't improving—that I was putting all my time and energy into the wrong things—I improved, fast, and a lot changed in my life for the better. I got a job in a Japanese company and eventually left to start my own business. These days, I do everything in Japanese exactly the same as I would if I were living in the UK, doing everything in English – the language barriers that held me back for so long are totally gone.

The point I'm trying to make here, is that no matter how hard things seem now, they can get better.

You’ve just got to keep pushing forward to improve and refusing to be satisfied with half-assed efforts and mediocre results.

Afterward

Thank you for investing in *Master English FAST*, and for choosing to take your extraordinary journey to English mastery with me.

I realise this book has been somewhat of a roller-coaster ride, and that I've likely challenged (and hopefully destroyed) many of the beliefs you had about improving your English.

These uncomfortable truths can be really bloody painful, I know…but consider them growing pains. Ultimately, it's all for the best.

This said, the journey ain't over.

And it never will be.

When it comes to English, there will always be more to learn, and room to improve. Learning is a life-long pursuit. It started the day you were born, and it will continue until the day you die.

As you know by now, I'm very critical of the traditional education systems. The saddest thing for me is when students finish school and say, "Great! No more study!!"

When I hear this, I know school has failed them. Because the people who live truly fulfilling lives are eternal students.

The question now, of course, is what are you going to do with the information you've just read?

It's a sad fact that most people will read this book and then never do anything.

From the moment I started teaching, I've been frustrated and disappointed again and again.

It's frustrating for me personally, because writing this book was hard work – just like producing courses and programmes like EES is super hard work. Sure, it's nice to get your money in my bank account. Ultimately, the sales that come from this book, the courses I make, as well as fees from coaching clients, are what put food on my table, clothes on my kids and beer in my fridge. The money helps me live. But more than that, you know

what drives me? My *Why*? Hearing success stories from people just like you. Yes, I've heard many over the years. But I want to hear more.

So do me a favour: do the damn work. Implement what you've learned in this book, do something amazing, and let me know.

To help you, I've put together a resource area including examples, videos and a whole lot more. Check out the "Resources" section at the end of this book.

Cheers,

Julian Northbrook
The Language Punk

P.S. To get access to the free resource area that comes with this book, just go to: http://doingenglish.com/mefr

About Julian and His Work

In a nutshell: Language is what I do. I teach language. I learn language. And I research language. You already know that, of course. So here's a few more things about me:

- Dropped out of school at 16 to sleep on my friend's sofa and work in a bacon factory.
- Got a scholarship to study at an art college where I went to parties every day and eventually quit fine art to study fashion design instead.
- After a year bumming around London, working in a bar in Camden Town and sleeping on more sofas, I went to back to art – this time at university.
- A lot more parties happened until one day I suddenly I realised it was over and I had nothing to show for my three years other than a second-rate degree and a Japanese girlfriend.
- Said *fuck it* to life in the UK, and went to Japan for a year in 2007 (still there).
- Said I'd learn Japanese after being turned down from the job I wanted.
- Got serious about Japanese in 2008 when my father-in-law told me I had to if I wanted to marry his daughter.
- Speaking Japanese pretty well since 2009 and at translator/ business level since 2011.
- Masters in Applied Linguistics and English Language Teaching (with Distinction, no less – not bad for a school dropout).
- PhD student in Psycholinguistics (researching lexical-bundle processing in second language learners – still not bad for a school dropout).
- Father of three (very noisy) bilingual children.
- Husband of one (very short) Japanese wife.

- Proponent of constant, life-long self-education.
- Lover and avid believer in the power of e-learning.
- Runner.
- Reader.
- Obsessive coffee drinker.
- Fan of 80s synth-pop, techno and electronic music.
- Quite fond of beer, too.

How to Work with Julian

The best way to work more closely with me to master your English is to join my English learning community, *Julian Northbrook's League of Extraordinary English Speakers.*

As part of this programme, you get the monthly *'EES Gazette'*, a print newsletter that goes through your letter box once a month and is dedicated to using your English effectively in international business, you get a new lesson to study each week, as well as access to all past lessons and *'Extraordinary English Conversations'* interviews I've done, free critique and feedback on your English, access to the Community, and much, much more. You can find information (as well as how to join) by going here:

http://doingenglish.com/membership

If you're hoping to become a coaching client… know that my fees are extremely high, and I only work with certain kinds of people. You can, however, see information about coaching here:

http://doingenglish.com/coaching

Resources

You can find more resources, examples, videos demonstrating many of the exercises discussed in this book (such as the 432 exercise) and some that weren't, as well as some sample learning materials (including the ones discussed in Chapter 6 and, again, ones that demonstrate the exercises) by going to:

http://doingenglish.com/mefr

Finally…

Books Mentioned

Here is a list of the books mentioned in this book.

They're all well worth reading:

- *A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning* – Peter Skehan
- *The Culture Map* – Erin Meyer
- *The Rise of Superman: Decoding the Science of Ultimate Human Performance* – Steven Kotler
- *Fearless Fluency: Speak English with Extraordinary Confidence* – Julian Northbrook
- *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* – Simon Sinek
- Reading the Oxford Dictionary: one man, one year, 21,730 pages – Ammon Shea
- The 80/20 Principle: The Secret to Achieving More with Less – Richard Koch
- 80/20 Sales and Marketing: The Definitive Guide to Working Less and Making More – Perry Marshall
- Harry Hole Series – Jo Nesbo
- *Inspector Chen Cao Series* – Qiu Xiaolong

What People are Saying About Julian

My biggest concern before joining EES was: is this really going to work? What is the difference between EES and the millions of English courses out there? I want to literally see the results!

But EES has helped me twofold. One way is that I can start integrating heaps of phrases/sentences into my daily life which makes me much more confident. The second is that a lot of the ideas introduced can be applied to every aspect of life (mindset, setting goals). For example, I use the mindset introduced in the course to help me stay focused on my music practicing journey.

The weekly lessons are certainly the staple, but the community is really a catalyst. You have a lot of people from all walks of life with the same goal working together. I really learned a lot just from browsing the community posts.

There are many interviews in the course as well, which are really eye-opening.

Also, Julian is like a close friend who doesn't just teach you stuff – he also chats with you about his life, your life. (He listened to my mixtape the other day!).

I would recommend EES – but only to doers, not wannabes. In the end, whether this course works or not really depends on how hard you are willing to work on your English.

Songtao Lin

It is difficult to find the right words to express my gratitude for Julian, who inspired me in a profound way as I was struggling towards my ultimate goal of becoming a confident English speaker with high fluency.

Julian demonstrates a genuine interest in every learner and a sincere desire to share his knowledge and expertise. He makes learning come alive,

makes the content relevant, and even shares in some laughs and fun along the way. He shows us the path to becoming exceptional and instils in us the discipline, strength, and patience to navigate around the hurdles that littered the English learning path.

I never thought I'd meet someone in my twenties that was so similar to me in terms of mindset and value. In the EES community, I'm not only learning a language but also connecting with experts, doers and ordinary people from different disciplines, sharing great ideas and gaining valuable skills. I am so blessed to have this amazing group of people who assist me to accelerate my English journey and awareness into the professional arena.

Maggie Wang

When I first joined EES I had just got a new job. and I had to be able to speak English well right away, otherwise I could have lost my job. I had to be able to speak English during meetings and I had to talk with native English speakers to complete my task as a credit analyst. A few months after I joined EES I was able to speak up during a meeting because EES changed my mindset.

Although my main purpose to join the *EES* programme was for my job, I was surprised because it changed my life positively living in English speaking country. I live in Los Angeles now and unlike Japan strangers talk to me a lot in the U.S. Because of my fear, even the cashier at the Starbucks did not understand what I ordered or I was to be scared to enter an elevator because it's a closed place that I could not run away from small talk. I was so scared to talk with people. Now I sometimes start a conversation in the elevator and can order at Starbucks without a problem.

Posting video in the community improved my public speaking skill and Julian’s feedback and critique helped me a lot. Currently the weekly lessons help me most because I can improve actual English speaking skill. I really think joining EES was the best choice in my life.

Hanako

I have problems with English. I feel a lack of vocabulary, sometimes I have problems with pronunciation, I have problems with grammar and how to use them and when to use them. I have problems with understanding.

Sometimes I have problems explaining what I really want to say and to be understandable.

The EES programme is really different compared with traditional English courses. It is very embracing. You will practice everything, from noticing your language problems, to writing, to casual language and slang. You learn immediately how and when to use it. You will use them on your own, which is, I think, very good.

I find it much easier to learn new language like this than when I am studying from traditional materials. It is much easier for me to remember these things and to see them in real life. I can almost hear Julian’s voice when I want to use some of the things I have been learned in the *EES* programme.

Karollina

I discovered Julian and Doing English through a blog. I was looking for methods to improve my listening comprehension and on the blog of a Spanish teacher they recommended shadowing and had a link with Julian's YouTube video. I found it fantastic for its simplicity and I liked his way of explaining things.

Doing English has helped me not only with English but with living my life: setting goals, fostering discipline, working effectively and obtaining a very effective way to learn English. The thing I like best is Julian's way of presenting the work that needs to be done. There are no lies: there are no magic pills or shortcuts. You have to work daily, but do it in an effective and fun way too. I like Julian’s Punk philosophy and pragmatism: it is not a matter of obtaining a degree or passing tests, but of acquiring communicative skills. That you understand the language and you are able to speak without shame or fear.

I also like Julian's passion for work and your company. Keeping a daily contact with his clients or students by e-mail always telling interesting and personal things is fantastic. I also want to apply the way you work in my own company.

I have recommended Doing English to my Facebook contacts because I think it is important to share the good things and the job well done. This is a global and collaborative time. Thank you for Doing English!

Rafael Gonzalez García

In spite of having done a few short courses of Doing English and found them very useful I was reluctant to join the *EES* programme because Julian kept saying *"mind you, it is hard work"*. Now I am part of it and even if it is hard work.

I really enjoy the way it is planned. My English was all rusted and EES is really helping me to brush it up to a native speaker level.

What I like most is that EES transforms hard work into fun, even for middle age people like me.

I also enjoy very much to be part of a beautiful universal and friendly family through the web, all willing to "get there" with English language.

I would recommend EES to anyone who loves the English language and feels that it's time to make the effort to get nearer and nearer to a native speaker's level.

I have visited loads of links seeking an English teacher and I found Julian was the one to offer all of what I was looking for: a teacher who is always there to offer his warm and friendly assistance and who is restless to push and remind me that I can and should reach the excellence.

Susana Sisman

Joining EES has been the most important and long-lasting online learning commitment I’ve ever made. I joined it in the month it was established, in 2015.

The EES programme really helped me to transform my random learning into organised, habitual activity. It became a part of my life. I’m hooked on Weekly Lessons, which give me a regular dose of everyday language I can use straight away.

EES was the first online place I posted in English and took part in discussions on topics that interest me. This activity taught me to think in English without translating in my home language. EES encouraged me to try new learning methods and share the experience with others. It motivated me and helped to embrace setbacks.

In the community, I found reliable learning partners who make my learning journey more fun, memorable and worthwhile.

I’d recommend EES to intermediate and upper-intermediate learners who want to make English a part of their everyday life. EES is a perfect place to boost your confidence and move your English on a higher level.

Grazyna