



English Learning for Curious Minds



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BONUS EPISODE 1

How to use a dictionary (properly) to learn English

January 31, 2020

[00:00:03] Hello, hello, hello, and welcome to the first, the **inaugural**¹ members-only English Learning for Curious Minds podcast.

[00:00:13] Let me just start by saying a big thank you for your **ongoing**² membership.

[00:00:19] The podcast wouldn't be possible without your support and every one of you is the reason that I do the show.

[00:00:28] I guess that most of you should know who I am by now, but just in case you need a reminder, I'm Alastair Budge. I'm the host of the podcast and the founder of Leonardo English.

[00:00:43] Today we are going to talk about something that I think is pretty important when learning English, or any language **for that matter**³, but that a lot of people don't fully appreciate.

[00:00:57] And that thing is the dictionary.

¹ an inaugural event is the first in a series of planned events

² continuing to exist or develop, or happening at the present moment

³ used to show that a statement is true in another situation, e.g. Ming's never been to Spain, or to any European country for that matter



How to use a dictionary (properly) to learn English

[00:01:01] Today it is time to talk about how to use a dictionary properly as part of your English learning [toolkit](#)⁴.

[00:01:10] And this isn't just going to be a list of the best dictionaries where afterwards you can go away with a shopping list of dictionaries to buy or apps to download.

[00:01:22] But I will give you a few hints [on that front](#)⁵.

[00:01:26] Oh no. Today we are going to talk about how to use a dictionary properly.

[00:01:33] [On one level](#)⁶ you might think it's pretty self-explanatory.

[00:01:37] You look up the meanings of words you don't know and that you can't figure out through context and whether it's a huge, big paper one that you have sitting on your desk, a mini one that you keep in your pocket if you're [out and about](#)⁷, if it's an app on your phone or even Google Translate.

[00:01:57] The purpose of a dictionary is pretty simple. It tells you the meanings of words, and yes, of course at a basic level, this is correct.

[00:02:10] But this would be like looking at one of the cars used in a James Bond film and thinking, well, it's probably quite a good car to go and get some shopping in.

[00:02:22] Yes, of course it can do that, but if you think of it purely in these terms, then you're missing out on a huge amount that will really help you get the most out of using a dictionary and help you increase your vocabulary, be a more effective learner, and ultimately improve your English faster than you might do otherwise.

⁴ a personal set of resources, abilities, or skills

⁵ in that respect

⁶ something that you say when you are speaking about two opposite ways of thinking about or reacting to a situation

⁷ away from your home



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[00:02:47] So firstly, let's look at the different types of dictionaries that you can use, as this is actually quite an important choice for you to make.

[00:02:57] When learning English, or when learning any language really, you can choose either a monolingual dictionary or a bilingual dictionary. In case you don't know what those words mean, a monolingual dictionary means that the meaning of an English word will be explained in English, while with a bilingual dictionary, the meaning will be explained in another language, in your mother tongue.

[00:03:25] For beginners and for anyone who is up to about an intermediate level. A bilingual dictionary is normally preferred.

[00:03:36] This is because with a monolingual dictionary, if you can't understand the words that are being explained in the definition, well, life is going to be pretty difficult.

[00:03:49] Good monolingual dictionaries should always use simple words in the explanation of a more complicated word, but even though they do this, it'll always be harder than if there was a translation given in your mother tongue.

[00:04:04] But for language learners of intermediate level and above, both bilingual and monolingual dictionaries can be used. And it just depends on personal preference.

[00:04:17] All of you, I believe, should be at an intermediate level and above, and so you can choose which one you prefer.

[00:04:26] Now there are different views on this, and once people decide that they prefer one particular type, it's normally quite hard to change their mind.

[00:04:38] People are pretty **stuck in their ways**⁸ and internet forums are full of people arguing one way or the other.

⁸ completely unwilling to change one's ways of doing or thinking about things



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[00:04:48] Monolingual dictionaries are normally preferred in academic institutions such as university.

[00:04:54] When I was at university, for example, studying French and Italian, we were forced to use monolingual dictionaries.

[00:05:03] The reason for this is that as we are already at a decent enough level to learn new vocabulary in context, and the theory was that we should be exposed to as much of the [target](#)⁹ languages as possible, that we should be thinking, writing, reading, dreaming in that language in a real state of total [immersion](#)¹⁰.

[00:05:29] So that was why we were made to use monolingual dictionaries. But there are those that say that they really don't like monolingual dictionaries, saying that they make the process of finding the meaning of a word much harder and more [time-consuming](#)¹¹. And what this does is it distracts from the [flow](#)¹² of reading or listening in the [target](#) language.

[00:05:56] Steve Kaufman, the famous [polyglot](#)¹³ and founder of thelinguist.com says that he finds that monolingual dictionaries slow him down, and therefore in the long run they reduce the amount of exposure he has to what he calls [meaningful](#) content.

[00:06:17] So his view is that monolingual dictionaries are less efficient and actually that the [net](#) effect on language learning is negative.

[00:06:29] So he doesn't like them at all, and he prefers a bilingual dictionary.

⁹ the target language is the language you are learning

¹⁰ to become completely involved in something

¹¹ something that takes a lot of time to do

¹² a situation in which something is continuously moving, a state of concentration

¹³ someone who can speak multiple languages



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[00:06:34] This podcast could go on for hours, days, even if I went through all of the arguments for and against bilingual or monolingual dictionaries, and at the end of the day, it just depends on what you're most comfortable with.

[00:06:50] It also doesn't have to be an [either or](#)¹⁴ situation.

[00:06:54] You can use both.

[00:06:56] And given that there are so many fantastic free dictionaries available online, you will find out what works for you.

[00:07:06] All of the definitions in the key vocabulary for the English Learning for Curious Minds podcast, as you will know, are given in English, as we want to be an intensive English only resource.

[00:07:21] However, of course, you can make up your own list in your own language or look up any word in a bilingual dictionary if the definition provided in English isn't [sufficiently](#)¹⁵ clear and naturally as your English level improves and your vocabulary increases, you'll find it easier and easier to use a monolingual dictionary if you so choose.

[00:07:47] Okay. So the choice of what type of dictionary to use, either monolingual or bilingual is up to you.

[00:07:57] How you actually use a dictionary though it's something that lots of people don't get right, meaning that they end up looking up the meaning of a particular word

¹⁴ used to refer to a situation in which there is a choice between two different plans of action, but both together are not possible

¹⁵ enough



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[there and then](#)¹⁶, but then they don't really do anything more to try to actually [cement](#)¹⁷ that word in their memory.

[00:08:16] Meaning that when they come across the word later on, whether that's a day, a week, or a month later, they really struggle to [recall](#)¹⁸ what it means.

[00:08:28] So what they do is they just look it up, they solve the immediate problem, but there's no [long term](#)¹⁹ strategy around how to actually remember that word.

[00:08:40] And this is where a few of the techniques that I'm going to share with you today can really help. So let's give ourselves a real life example. Let's say I come across the word sufficiently, which we actually had thirty seconds [back](#)²⁰.

[00:08:58] One mistake that people make related to looking up vocabulary in a dictionary is to immediately reach for the dictionary as soon as they find a word they don't know, and this is actually a big mistake. The dictionary should be your [last resort](#)²¹ only if you can't understand the word through context.

[00:09:21] There's a lot of academic research that suggests that you are more likely to remember a word if you've understood the definition through context instead of just immediately looking it up in a dictionary.

¹⁶ immediately

¹⁷ to make something such as an agreement or friendship stronger

¹⁸ remember

¹⁹ continuing a long time into the future

²⁰ ago, in the past

²¹ used for talking about something that you only think of doing or using if all other methods fail



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[00:09:36] So what you should do is wait until the rest of the sentence or just give it a bit more time and then you may well be able to understand the meaning of the word contextually.

[00:09:48] Learning to use context to understand words is also a big, big skill in itself, and this probably calls for a [standalone²²](#) podcast on the topic.

[00:10:00] You'll know that lots of [polyglots](#) and people who are able to speak multiple languages learn languages faster than people who can't, and one of the reasons for this is that they are very good at understanding meanings contextually.

[00:10:16] And yes, learning to use context to understand words is this huge skill, so I think we will probably do a podcast on that later on.

[00:10:26] However, you can't understand everything through context and if you've tried but haven't managed, here's where our dictionary comes into play.

[00:10:37] So I could just look up the word in a dictionary, either a monolingual or bilingual one and find out the meaning.

[00:10:48] And that's what most people do. For most people, it stops there. They do nothing more than just solve the problem of not understanding that word [there and then](#) and they don't do anything more to try and remember the word.

[00:11:04] Just finding the meaning of a word so that you can move on and understand the rest of the article, chapter or podcast is an okay strategy if you're just rushing through it.

²² unique, separate



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[00:11:18] But if your objective is to actually continually build your vocabulary and improve your [lexicon²³](#), then there are a few things that you really need to be doing with the dictionary in order to maximise your chances of remembering that word.

[00:11:37] Assuming that you don't have a photographic memory, then you probably won't be able to [recall](#) that word that you've just taken the time to look up in a few weeks time.

[00:11:48] So here are a few things you can do.

[00:11:52] Firstly, you should write the word down, of course, and write down the definition, either in your own language or in English or both, if you're feeling particularly, particularly studious.

[00:12:07] I've said elsewhere that every serious language student needs to have their own little black book, their own little dictionary, and so you need to be constantly adding new words to it.

[00:12:20] So when you find a new word, you should reach for your little black book and add that new word to it. But it doesn't just end here. You don't just write down the word, write down the definition, there are quite a few more things that you should be doing to give yourself the best possible chance at remembering that word.

[00:12:41] So write down the word in context - write it down first in the context of how you came across it, and then write it down in another context.

[00:12:53] Good dictionaries will often have, these other contexts and other examples that you can just [jot down²⁴](#), but you should also think about it yourself. Create a sentence yourself and write that down.

²³ (a list of) all the words used in a particular language or subject, or a dictionary

²⁴ to write something



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[00:13:08] Why?

[00:13:09] Well because it's only through contextual repetition that you will give yourself the best chance of remembering that particular word.

[00:13:20] Some of us, and I'm certainly in this category, have very visual memories too, so to remember the word, you need to see it written down or you need to write it yourself.

[00:13:32] My wife, for example, whenever she comes across a new word in English, she asks for it to be **spelled out**²⁵ for her as that's the way her brain works.

[00:13:43] So you need to write it down, and write down the definition, and write down some sentences in context. But you should also practice saying it out loud and if you're comfortable with the phonetic alphabet, write it down in **IPA**²⁶ as well.

[00:14:00] Why?

[00:14:01] Well, for most people, they want to be able to recognise words when they are spoken and to be able to pronounce them in the correct way. They don't just need to be able to recognise them written down or to be able to write them. We're not talking about reading and writing Latin here.

[00:14:20] With all of these activities that you're doing as you're looking up these words in the dictionary, the amazing thing that's happening is that you are actually just creating your own dictionary. You are creating a dictionary of words that you have come across through being in contact with English, a dictionary that you can revisit at any time, packed full of words that you can now concentrate on memorising, or rather concentrate on not forgetting.

²⁵ to explain the spelling letter by letter or to explain something in a very clear way with details

²⁶ abbreviation for the International Phonetic Alphabet: a system of symbols for showing how words are pronounced



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[00:14:51] And words that are actually relevant to you, and they're relevant because you've come across them naturally through coming into contact with English in your [day-to-day](#)²⁷ life. They are relevant to things that you are interested in to your life and to the kind of language that you want to use to communicate.

[00:15:13] So they're more relevant, you'll use them more frequently and therefore you're more likely to remember them.

[00:15:21] The title of this podcast is actually how to use a dictionary to learn English, but this is perhaps a little [deceptive](#)²⁸. The answer really is to use the dictionary to create your own mini dictionary.

[00:15:36] One other dictionary that is certainly worth talking about is something that is both amazing and terrible at the same time.

[00:15:45] And I guess a lot of you probably use it on a daily basis, and that is Google Translate.

[00:15:53] Google Translate is both the English learners best friend and the English learners worst enemy.

[00:16:01] It's incredibly powerful and the translations of sentences and entire pieces of text can actually be pretty good.

[00:16:10] The Leonardo English blog, which I definitely recommend you checking out if you haven't already, has a Spanish version that's powered entirely by Google Translate.

[00:16:22] We're going to be adding more languages shortly, but at the moment, so that's as of January the 31st there's just a Spanish one.

²⁷ happening every day as a regular part of your job or life

²⁸ making you believe something that is not true



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[00:16:33] Google Translate also has some really cool functionality that I guess some of you will already be familiar with.

[00:16:41] So things like you can take pictures of words with your phone and it will automatically translate them, you can do handwriting, voice recognition, and all sorts of great stuff.

[00:16:53] If you're using Chrome on your mobile, you can even highlight a word and press translate to get it Google Translated. And every word has a speak out loud button, which is really handy for understanding how to pronounce [tricky](#)²⁹ words.

[00:17:09] So [don't get me wrong](#)³⁰, it is a fantastic tool for lots and lots of use cases, but, and this is a big but, Google Translate is no [substitute](#)³¹ for a dictionary, and when looking up single words, not in context, it often [falls short](#)³². It often gives definitions that aren't correct in the context of a sentence.

[00:17:38] English is a particularly difficult language for words that have multiple meanings based on the context that they're in, and if you're looking up the definition of a word, Google Translate will often provide a translation which is incorrect in the context of the word.

[00:17:57] So [long story short](#)³³, don't use Google Translate as a bilingual dictionary.

[00:18:04] My personal preference, and this works for English to the majority of the language pairs where people are listening to this podcast is Word Reference.

²⁹ If a piece of work or problem is tricky, it is difficult to deal with and needs careful attention or skill

³⁰ said when you think someone might not understand what you say, or be upset by it

³¹ replacement

³² doesn't meet expectations or requirements

³³ used when you do not tell all the details



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[00:18:16] I imagine some of you might use Word Reference already, but for those of you who don't, I'll just explain exactly why I think it is the one to use. So with Word Reference, you get a monolingual dictionary and a bilingual dictionary [in one](#)³⁴.

[00:18:32] You can see the definition in English and your own language, plus you get several examples of the word in context and [synonyms](#)³⁵ in both languages.

[00:18:45] So if you're looking for a dictionary that you can get online or as an app, Word Reference is definitely an excellent option, although there are, of course, many others that do a pretty similar thing.

[00:18:57] So as I said, this podcast didn't have a huge list of dictionaries to buy or apps to download, but I hope it has helped give you an idea of the kinds of things that you should be doing to use a dictionary to its fullest potential.

[00:19:15] And as with any advice on this podcast and any advice you get from anyone, you should always [take it with a pinch of salt](#)³⁶.

[00:19:25] You need to find out what works for you, and every language learner is different.

[00:19:31] What I hope you have learned though, is that the dictionary can be a lot more powerful than just telling you the meaning of a word.

[00:19:40] A dictionary holds the keys to the [building blocks](#)³⁷ of any language, and if you get into good habits of using them in the most effective ways, you'll find yourself

³⁴ together, in a pair

³⁵ words or phrases that have the same or nearly the same meaning as another word or phrase in the same language

³⁶ to not completely believe something that you are told

³⁷ the foundations, the pieces that something is built on



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progressing far more quickly than if you're just using them to quickly look up the meanings of words and move on.

[00:19:58] So give it a go if you are not doing this already, trying looking words up in a dictionary in the way that I suggested, test it out for a good **chunk**³⁸ of time, at least two weeks, then let me know how you get on. I'd love to hear it.

[00:20:16] I'll be doing exactly the same as I'm learning Spanish this year. I didn't speak a word of Spanish at the start of 2020 and I'm making it my mission to learn it to at least a B2 standard using only language acquisition tools so podcasts, reading articles, that kind of stuff. And of course I'll be using a dictionary in exactly the way that I've just spoken about.

[00:20:43] Okay, that is it for today's **inaugural** English Learning for Curious Minds members-only podcast. It's the first one we've released, and I'd love to know your feedback. As always, please feel free to email hi@leonardoenglish.com.

[00:21:02] For those of you who have emailed in, you'll know by now that I love hearing from each and every one of you and read and respond to every single email that I get. So I hope you will let me know what you think and if you have any questions about anything in this podcast, then just **fire away**³⁹. I've been Alastair Budge, and this has been the first English Learning for Curious Minds members-only podcast.

[00:21:30] I will catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

³⁸ large piece

³⁹ used to tell someone they may begin asking questions



Key vocabulary

Word

Definition

Inaugural

an inaugural event is the first in a series of planned events

Ongoing

continuing to exist or develop, or happening at the present moment

For that matter

used to show that a statement is true in another situation, e.g. Ming's never been to Spain, or to any European country for that matter

Toolkit

a personal set of resources, abilities, or skills

On that front

in that respect

On one level

something that you say when you are speaking about two opposite ways of thinking about or reacting to a situation

Out and about

away from your home

Stuck in their ways

completely unwilling to change one's ways of doing or thinking about things

Target

the target language is the language you are learning

Immersion

to become completely involved in something

Time-consuming

something that takes a lot of time to do

Flow

a situation in which something is continuously moving, a state of concentration



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Polyglot	someone who can speak multiple languages
Meaningful	useful, serious, or important
Net	overall, on balance
Either or	used to refer to a situation in which there is a choice between two different plans of action, but both together are not possible
Sufficiently	enough
There and then	immediately
Cement	to make something such as an agreement or friendship stronger
Recall	remember
Long term	continuing a long time into the future
Back	ago, in the past
Last resort	used for talking about something that you only think of doing or using if all other methods fail
Standalone	unique, separate
Lexicon	(a list of) all the words used in a particular language or subject, or a dictionary
Jot down	to write something
Spelled out	to explain the spelling letter by letter or to explain something in a very clear way with details
Ipa	abbreviation for the International Phonetic Alphabet: a system of



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symbols for showing how words are pronounced

Day-to-day

happening every day as a regular part of your job or life

Deceptive

making you believe something that is not true

Tricky

If a piece of work or problem is tricky, it is difficult to deal with and needs careful attention or skill

Don't get me wrong

said when you think someone might not understand what you say, or be upset by it

Substitute

replacement

Falls short

doesn't meet expectations or requirements

Long story short

used when you do not tell all the details

In one

together, in a pair

Synonyms

a word or phrase that has the same or nearly the same meaning as another word or phrase in the same language

Take it with a pinch of salt

to not completely believe something that you are told

Building blocks

the foundations, the pieces that something is built on

Chunk

large piece

Fire away

used to tell someone they may begin asking questions



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We'd love to get your feedback on this podcast.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

You can email us at hi@leonardoenglish.com.

