



English Learning for Curious Minds



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Episode #113

Mao Zedong

8th Dec, 2020

[00:00:00] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:11] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:22] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about Mao Zedong, Chairman Mao, the founding father of the People's Republic of China and its leader until his death in 1976.

[00:00:37] Now, I should start by saying that trying to [cram¹](#) the entire life of Mao into 20 minutes is a difficult task, so this will evidently not be the [conclusive²](#) guide to the life of Chairman Mao.

¹ fit in a short period or space

² complete



[00:00:52] But, what I do hope is that this will give you an idea about the man, his life, and his legacy, and by the end of this episode you will know a little bit more about him than you do now.

[00:01:05] I'll also say that the pronunciation of Mao Zedong is more like Mao Zedong, but we'll stick with the English version for this podcast - Mao Zedong - apologies to any Mandarin speakers that may be listening.

[00:01:20] So, without wasting one more minute, let's get started.

[00:01:26] The name Mao Zedong probably conjures up³ all sorts of ideas in your mind. You might think of him as a great leader, a man who managed to unite China and fight off imperial⁴ forces.

[00:01:40] But unless you're listening to this episode from within China, you probably have a different view of him.

[00:01:47] You might think of him as a dictator, you might think of the Cultural Revolution or of the millions of people who died under his leadership.

[00:01:58] One thing is for sure though, he is an interesting character, he had a fascinating life and changed the world forever.

³ makes you think

⁴ relating to an empire



[00:02:07] Mao Zedong was born in a village in Hunan province, in south central China, in 1893.

[00:02:16] As a young boy he was a voracious⁵ reader, and a keen⁶ student of history.

[00:02:23] As he was growing up, at the turn of the 20th century, China was in a pretty poor position.

[00:02:30] It had suffered humiliation⁷ during the Opium Wars, and the Qing dynasty⁸, the ruling dynasty, was on its last legs⁹, it was about to collapse.

[00:02:41] As a student, Mao developed an admiration for foreign revolutionary leaders, people such as George Washington and Napoleon, and developed a belief that China needed to be restored¹⁰ to its former glory.

⁵ having an extremely strong desire to do something, doing it a lot

⁶ wanting to do something a lot

⁷ feeling of shame and embarrassment

⁸ a period in time where one family ruled for a long time

⁹ in bad condition and about to fall down

¹⁰ brought back to its previous state



[00:02:58] When Mao was a young man, China grew more and more chaotic, overrun¹¹ by foreign powers and a far cry¹² from its previous position as a world power to be reckoned with¹³.

[00:03:11] Its last emperor was overthrown in 1911, and it became a republic, governed by a man called Sun Yat-Sen.

[00:03:20] Sun Yat-Sen didn't govern for long, handing over power to another man, Yuan Shikai, shortly after taking power.

[00:03:28] Yuan Shikai promoted himself from President to Emperor of China, but only managed to hold onto power for 83 days before the country was plunged¹⁴ into a civil war that lasted for 10 years.

[00:03:44] Long story short, China was in crisis. This experience, and the view that China needed to regain¹⁵ its rightful¹⁶ place in the world defined the ideology of young Mao.

¹¹ if somewhere is overrun by something, it is filled with that thing

¹² very different

¹³ considered to be strong and powerful

¹⁴ fallen down

¹⁵ get back

¹⁶ morally or legally correct



[00:03:59] Of course, it wasn't just in China that empires were crumbling and new political systems were [rising from the ashes¹⁷](#).

[00:04:08] In neighbouring Russia, in 1917, Lenin's Bolsheviks had overthrown the monarchy, the people had seized power from the [out of touch¹⁸](#) Russian [tsars¹⁹](#).

[00:04:20] Encouraged by the success of the Bolsheviks, Communist [sympathies²⁰](#) started to develop in China.

[00:04:28] The Chinese Communist Party was formed in 1921, and Mao was a founding member.

[00:04:34] The communists didn't have any real power at this time, though, and actually supported another political party, the Kuomintang, which in effect took over the rule of China in 1926.

[00:04:50] Now, I'm going to [skip over²¹](#) quite a lot here, but the period between the Kuomintang taking power in 1926 and the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 is full of power struggles, internal fighting, the war with Japan, and civil war in China.

¹⁷ if something rises from the ashes, it appears after something else has died

¹⁸ if you are out of touch, you don't know much about normal life

¹⁹ Russian rulers

²⁰ belief or support

²¹ pass quickly through without talking about



[00:05:11] It was during this period that it's believed that Mao started to develop his ideas about the power of the Chinese **peasant** class, that a Chinese revolution wouldn't come from the cities, like it had in Russia, but rather from the countryside, from the **peasants**²².

[00:05:31] Mao started to **loathe**²³, to hate, urban intellectuals and elites, believing them to be **out of touch** with the real people of China, the **peasants**.

[00:05:44] And it was the **peasants** who would fight the revolution and transform China, not the urban **proletariat**²⁴, like in Russia.

[00:05:53] Landowners, people who owned land, also became a target of Mao's, and he believed that the **peasant** class had been **exploited**²⁵, both economically and politically by those who owned the land.

[00:06:08] After these internal struggles within the Communist party, turning on the Kuomintang and starting a civil war, then chasing the Kuomintang out of China and causing them to **flee**²⁶ to Taiwan, the Chinese Communist Party was the most powerful force in China, and Mao Zedong found himself at the head of it.

²² someone who owns or rents a small piece of land

²³ hate

²⁴ the class of workers owning no property, usually in urban areas

²⁵ treated unfairly

²⁶ escape



[00:06:30] So, on the 1st of October 1949, he proclaimed²⁷ the establishment²⁸ of the People's Republic of China - China, as we know it today.

[00:06:41] He was almost 55 at the time, so certainly no spring chicken²⁹, not a young man.

[00:06:49] Now, we have sped through the first part of his life, but it really is after the formation of the PRC, of the People's Republic of China, that things start to get even more interesting.

[00:07:02] Mao Zedong was the Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, the only real party in China.

[00:07:08] He was the ruler of the country, but his power was by no means³⁰ secure.

[00:07:15] The infighting³¹ of the previous 30 years had taught him that people can fall just as quickly as they can rise, and so he embarked³² on a series of campaigns to solidify³³ his power, campaigns which never really stopped for the duration of his rule.

²⁷ say publicly that something exists

²⁸ start, beginning

²⁹ (colloquial) not young

³⁰ not at all

³¹ fighting within a group

³² started out on

³³ to make more solid



[00:07:35] These campaigns would target people in society that were considered to pose a threat³⁴ to Mao and the communist party.

[00:07:44] Initially the campaigns started by targeting previous Kuomintang members and anyone who had questioned the authority of the communist party, but they were later expanded to include everyone from public intellectuals to landowners.

[00:08:02] Not a huge amount of proof³⁵ was required, and being accused of being a counter-revolutionary³⁶ was often enough to be punished.

[00:08:12] During just the first one of these campaigns, the Campaign to Suppress³⁷ Counter-revolutionaries of 1950, 2.6 million people were arrested, 1.3 million people were imprisoned³⁸, and 712,000 people were executed³⁹, they were killed.

[00:08:31] And these are the official statistics from the Chinese Communist Party, and it's believed by many historians that the real numbers are a lot higher.

³⁴ to be a potential problem

³⁵ a fact that shows something is true

³⁶ someone who is against the revolution

³⁷ stop, especially using force

³⁸ put into prison

³⁹ killed (as a punishment)



[00:08:42] With some of the more immediate threats to power out of the way, Mao sought to transform the country from an agricultural, peasant-based⁴⁰ economy to a communist, centrally run, industrial economy.

[00:08:57] As the Russians did, Mao decided to implement⁴¹ a series of 5-year plans, plans for what the country needed to achieve in 5 years in order to reach the next level of its development.

[00:09:12] China at this time was still a pretty weak, poor country.

[00:09:18] It was growing apart from its more powerful communist neighbour, Russia, and it also feared an attack from the west, which was not keen on the idea of a strong and powerful communist China.

[00:09:32] Mao sought to radically transform the country, improving its military capabilities⁴², but also by industrialising the economy so that it no longer needed to rely on aid and protection from its communist big brother, the Soviet Union.

[00:09:49] How this was to be achieved was by transforming peasant communities into something called state collectives⁴³, or communes⁴⁴, so that instead of peasants just

⁴⁰ where peasants provide most of the workforce and production

⁴¹ put into place

⁴² abilities

⁴³ shared farms

⁴⁴ shared farms



farming their own smaller pieces of land, they would [pool them together⁴⁵](#) and production and distribution would be centrally controlled.

[00:10:10] In addition to this, Mao encouraged these [communes](#) to start making steel for industry, and small, [makeshift⁴⁶](#) steel furnaces were created, with [peasants](#) melting their metal agricultural tools to make steel.

[00:10:28] Unfortunately these plans did not turn out to be the [resounding⁴⁷](#) success that Mao had hoped for. And that's a little bit of an understatement.

[00:10:39] You might have heard of The Great Leap Forward, which was the second of the five year plans, and started in 1958.

[00:10:49] The main objective of The Great Leap Forward was to increase agricultural and industrial production in these [communes](#), and to transform the way in which China fed itself.

[00:11:02] Previously, as we said, the [peasants](#) had grown food for themselves. They might have sold some [excess⁴⁸](#) rice, some rice that they didn't need to eat themselves, but it was all pretty local.

⁴⁵ put together

⁴⁶ temporary and low quality

⁴⁷ great

⁴⁸ more than what is required



[00:11:15] Mao's idea for this new Chinese economy was centrally planned, so food would be produced in these large [communes](#)⁴⁹ according to centrally set targets, then it would be redistributed based on where it was required.

[00:11:32] That all sounds ok in theory, but in practice these new [communes](#), these new [collectives](#), were under increasing pressure to report higher and higher numbers of food production.

[00:11:46] The more food that a [commune](#) reported producing, the better example it was that Mao's ideas were working.

[00:11:54] [Commune](#) leaders, [eager](#)⁵⁰ to [please](#)⁵¹ their superiors and not seem lazy or '[counter-revolutionary](#)⁵²', would report that their [communes](#) had produced far more than they had done.

[00:12:07] Because the economy was centrally planned, and food was redistributed between [communes](#), they would have to send their '[excess](#) food' away to be redistributed.

⁴⁹ shared farm

⁵⁰ wanting to do something

⁵¹ make happy

⁵² against the revolution



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Mao Zedong

[00:12:19] But the problem was that in many cases there wasn't excess food, they had just reported excess food to not seem anti-revolutionary and to keep up⁵³ with their neighbours.

[00:12:33] Whatsmore, in many communes the peasants had religiously followed the guidance of Chairman Mao and melted⁵⁴ their metal tools to create steel, which would be sent away to create industrial equipment, so they had nothing left to actually farm with.

[00:12:52] So, not only did the peasants on these communes have to send away large amounts of their crops⁵⁵, of their rice, of their food, but they had destroyed large amounts of their tools that they would normally use to farm.

[00:13:08] The result of all of this chaos was horrific.

[00:13:12] Millions of people starved⁵⁶ to death, and the Great Leap Forward is believed to have caused the deaths of anywhere from 18 million to 45 million Chinese, and making this the largest famine⁵⁷ in human history.

⁵³ manage to do as well as

⁵⁴ heat something to turn it into a liquid

⁵⁵ plants such as grain, fruit or vegetables

⁵⁶ didn't have enough to eat

⁵⁷ a situation where a large group of people doesn't have enough to eat



[00:13:29] Although there aren't many historians who would argue that this was actually Mao's intention⁵⁸, there's a lot of evidence to suggest that he became aware of the inefficiencies⁵⁹ that this system caused, and the millions of deaths that were resulting from it, but accepted this as a necessary evil⁶⁰ for the industrialisation of China.

[00:13:53] By 1962, thankfully, the Great Leap Forward was over.

[00:13:58] It hadn't industrialised China and turned it into a power to be reckoned with, and apart from some token⁶¹ self-criticism⁶², some admitting of mistakes, nobody really took responsibility for what had gone wrong.

[00:14:15] Indeed, there was only one minister⁶³, one senior party official, who did criticise the Great Leap Forward, and he was quickly dismissed⁶⁴, he was quickly sacked⁶⁵, and replaced by someone more loyal to the party, and more loyal to Mao.

⁵⁸ aim or plan

⁵⁹ when time, resources or money are not used in the best way

⁶⁰ something bad that happens and is accepted in order to achieve a goal

⁶¹ small, unimportant and often only done to pretend that they are dealing with a problem

⁶² when you publicly say that you have done something wrong and admit your mistake

⁶³ a member of government

⁶⁴ removed from your position / job

⁶⁵ removed from your position / job



[00:14:32] Mao had started cultivating⁶⁶ a cult of personality⁶⁷ from the early 1930s, but it wasn't until the late 1950s and early 1960s that it was really taken to the next level.

[00:14:47] Posters, big signs, with quotes from Chairman Mao started to be put up all around the country, the Little Red Book with quotations from Chairman Mao was published in 1964.

[00:15:01] Saying anything other than complimentary⁶⁸ things about the Chairman was a quick way to be labelled⁶⁹ a rightist⁷⁰, to be called a rightist and counter-revolutionary, to probably be sent to do hard labour in the countryside, or worse.

[00:15:17] Then in 1966 Mao launched the Cultural Revolution, an all-out⁷¹ assault⁷² on any anti-communist elements⁷³.

⁶⁶ growing. developing

⁶⁷ a situation where lots of people are encouraged to admire someone, especially a political leader

⁶⁸ praising

⁶⁹ described

⁷⁰ someone who supports the political right

⁷¹ complete

⁷² attack

⁷³ people in a group, especially people who have a different view to the rest



[00:15:27] He encouraged schoolchildren to report on their teachers and parents, to

denounce⁷⁴ each other, and to generally cause chaos.

[00:15:38] It was also during this time that there was huge damage done to lots of China's cultural heritage⁷⁵, destroying temples, churches, and burning books. These were all considered part of China's ancient history; they were part of the past and had no present in the future of China.

[00:15:59] The Cultural Revolution lasted from 1966 until 1976, and turned into something even beyond Mao's control.

[00:16:09] It became a way for old grievances⁷⁶ to be settled⁷⁷, for old rivalries⁷⁸ to be played out⁷⁹.

[00:16:17] People would denounce their neighbours, schoolchildren would denounce teachers they didn't like, and these people would be sent away for re-education⁸⁰ at best, or in many cases, just beaten to death, killed.

⁷⁴ criticised

⁷⁵ traditional beliefs

⁷⁶ beliefs that you have been treated badly

⁷⁷ (of a grievance) to take revenge for

⁷⁸ situation in which two or more people have been competing, often for a long period of time

⁷⁹ happens

⁸⁰ (in Communist China) to be sent to understand how peasants live



[00:16:33] Within the upper echelons⁸¹ of the communist party, at the top of the party, it also became a way for people to jostle⁸² for power, to fight for power.

[00:16:45] Mao's fourth wife, a lady called Jiang Qing, formed a political faction⁸³ called the Gang of Four, and they were considered responsible for really pushing the Cultural Revolution to its extreme.

[00:17:00] Then on September the 9th, 1976, at the ripe old age⁸⁴ of 82, Mao Zedong died.

[00:17:09] He was embalmed⁸⁵, and left lying in state⁸⁶ in Beijing.

[00:17:15] Indeed, you can still visit him today. His mausoleum⁸⁷ is in Tiananmen Square, a few hundred metres away from the balcony from which he declared the founding of the People's Republic of China.

⁸¹ the top (of society)

⁸² compete

⁸³ a group within a larger group

⁸⁴ if you live to a ripe old age, you are older than average

⁸⁵ (of a dead body) treated with chemicals to stop decaying

⁸⁶ when the body of an important person (normally a politician) is left in a public place after they die, so that people can pay their respects to them

⁸⁷ a large building used to contain a dead body, usually of someone famous



[00:17:29] Now, that is very much a [whistlestop⁸⁸](#) tour through the life and times of Chairman Mao.

[00:17:36] What I want to talk about now is his legacy, which is certainly a complicated one.

[00:17:42] If you go to China now, you'll find Mao's face on every banknote, you'll see his painting hanging over Tiananmen Gate, and you won't find a person in China who doesn't at least know who he is.

[00:17:56] It hasn't even been 50 years since he died, and there are still hundreds of millions of people in China who lived under his rule. For them this isn't history, as such, it was part of their life.

[00:18:11] And, unlike countries that lived under such a powerful, [authoritarian⁸⁹](#) leader, whether that's the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, or Fascist Italy, there was never really a proper break with Maoism.

[00:18:27] It's the same country, the same party that is in power, and indeed Xi Jinping, the current president of China, is the son of a man called Xi Zhongxun, a famous communist revolutionary and close colleague of Mao's.

⁸⁸ quick

⁸⁹ strictly forcing people to obey laws



[00:18:43] The official Chinese Communist Party's position is that overall⁹⁰ Mao Zedong had a great, positive impact on China, but that he made some mistakes.

[00:18:54] In my experience when talking to Chinese people when travelling around the country, this does seem to be the official line⁹¹ - The Cultural Revolution was a mistake, but Mao put China on the course back towards greatness and was overall a good thing for China.

[00:19:13] The Chinese even quantify⁹² it, they put a number on this, saying that Mao was 70% good, 30% bad.

[00:19:23] Outside China, he has left a huge legacy.

[00:19:27] Maoism, Mao Zedong thought, has created political groups all over the world, from the Shining Path in Peru to the Communist Party of Angola, who were all inspired to certain degrees by Mao Zedong.

[00:19:42] In the West, he is often simplified as a brutal⁹³ dictator, someone who cared little for the Chinese people, killed tens of millions of people and is in a similar category to Hitler and Mussolini.

⁹⁰ in summary

⁹¹ official opinion

⁹² to measure or judge, providing an amount

⁹³ cruel and violent



[00:19:57] Although there's no denying that tens of millions of people died and were

persecuted⁹⁴ under his rule, portraying him as a mere⁹⁵ mad dictator is a bit of a

simplification⁹⁶, and there are multiple successes that one can point to, several

positive developments that happened under his rule.

[00:20:20] The levels of literacy⁹⁷, the amount of people who could read, improved

drastically⁹⁸. When he took power 80% of the population was illiterate⁹⁹, they couldn't

read, and by his death only 7% was.

[00:20:36] Life expectancy in China doubled under his rule, and the country was

dragged out¹⁰⁰ of being an agrarian¹⁰¹ economy to something approaching an

industrialised country.

[00:20:49] China remained a unified country, and the fact that the country has

remained united to this day, when almost every other communist country has either

collapsed or is in a pretty bad condition, is something that is often pointed at.

⁹⁴ treated unfairly

⁹⁵ used to show that something is unimportant

⁹⁶ making something more simple than it really is

⁹⁷ the ability to read and write

⁹⁸ extremely

⁹⁹ unable to read and write

¹⁰⁰ brought out of

¹⁰¹ farming-related



[00:21:05] But the question still stands: did this transformation require Mao?

[00:21:12] Could all of this have been achieved without the deaths of tens, or hundreds of millions of people, and could China have actually developed more quickly and more sustainably¹⁰² with a different leader to Mao?

[00:21:26] This is of course a question that historians inside and outside of China have been grappling with¹⁰³ for almost 50 years now, and I'm sure will grapple with for far more than 50 years to come.

[00:21:40] It's a complicated legacy, and it's certainly a little more complicated than just saying 70% good, 30% bad.

[00:21:49] OK then, that is it for this little look at the life and times of Mao Zedong.

[00:21:57] I imagine there are podcasts in China that go on for hours, days and weeks about all the details of his life, and this has been a very quick trip through his life, his impact, and his legacy. But I hope it has given you a little bit of an idea about the man.

[00:22:15] As always, I would love to know what you thought of this episode.

[00:22:19] I've had a request for more episodes about East Asian history, so if there is a particular part of the life of Mao Zedong, or Chinese history that you would like me to make, I'll do it.

¹⁰² in a way that can continue

¹⁰³ have difficulty dealing with



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Mao Zedong

[00:22:30] Luckily I spent many years reading about Mao Zedong, so it is a subject I'm quite knowledgeable¹⁰⁴ about already.

[00:22:37] So, do let me know.

[00:22:39] You can head right in to our community forum, which is at community.leonardoenglish.com and get chatting away to other curious minds, and of course to me.

[00:22:49] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:22:54] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

¹⁰⁴ knowing a lot



Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Cram	fit in a short period or space
Conclusive	complete
Conjures up	makes you think
Imperial	relating to an empire
Voracious	having an extremely strong desire to do something, doing it a lot
Keen	wanting to do something a lot
Humiliation	feeling of shame and embarrassment
Dynasty	a period in time where one family ruled for a long time
On its last legs	in bad condition and about to fall down
Restored	brought back to its previous state
Overrun	if somewhere is overrun by something, it is filled with that thing
Far cry	very different
Reckoned with	considered to be strong and powerful



Plunged	fallen down
Regain	get back
Rightful	morally or legally correct
Rising from the ashes	if something rises from the ashes, it appears after something else has died
Out of touch	if you are out of touch, you don't know much about normal life
Tsars	Russian rulers
Sympathies	belief or support
Skip over	pass quickly through without talking about
Peasant	someone who owns or rents a small piece of land
Peasants	someone who owns or rents a small piece of land
Loathe	hate
Proletariat	the class of workers owning no property, usually in urban areas
Exploited	treated unfairly
Flee	escape
Proclaimed	say publicly that something exists



Establishment start, beginning

No spring chicken (colloquial) not young

By no means not at all

Infighting fighting within a group

Embarked started out on

Solidify to make more solid

Pose a threat to be a potential problem

Proof a fact that shows something is true

Counter-revolutionary someone who is against the revolution

ry

Suppress stop, especially using force

Counter-revolutionaries people who are against the revolution

ries

Imprisoned put into prison

Executed killed (as a punishment)

Peasant-based where peasants provide most of the workforce and production



Implement put into place

Capabilities abilities

Collectives shared farms

Communes shared farms

Pool them together put together

Makeshift temporary and low quality

Resounding great

Excess more than what is required

Commune shared farm

Eager wanting to do something

Please make happy

Anti-revolutionary against the revolution

Keep up manage to do as well as

Melted heat something to turn it into a liquid

Crops plants such as grain, fruit or vegetables



Starved	didn't have enough to eat
Famine	a situation where a large group of people doesn't have enough to eat
Intention	aim or plan
Inefficiencies	when time, resources or money are not used in the best way
Necessary evil	something bad that happens and is accepted in order to achieve a goal
Token	small, unimportant and often only done to pretend that they are dealing with a problem
Self-criticism	when you publicly say that you have done something wrong and admit your mistake
Minister	a member of government
Dismissed	removed from your position / job
Sacked	removed from your position / job
Cultivating	growing, developing
Cult of personality	a situation where lots of people are encouraged to admire someone, especially a political leader
Complimentary	praising



Labelled	described
Rightist	someone who supports the political right
All-out	complete
Assault	attack
Elements	people in a group, especially people who have a different view to the rest
Denounce	criticised
Heritage	traditional beliefs
Grievances	beliefs that you have been treated badly
Settled	(of a grievance) to take revenge for
Rivalries	situation in which two or more people have been competing, often for a long period of time
Played out	happens
Re-education	(in Communist China) to be sent to understand how peasants live
Upper echelons	the top (of society)
Jostle	compete
Faction	a group within a larger group



Ripe old age	if you live to a ripe old age, you are older than average
Embalmed	(of a dead body) treated with chemicals to stop decaying
Lying in state	when the body of an important person (normally a politician) is left in a public place after they die, so that people can pay their respects to them
Mausoleum	a large building used to contain a dead body, usually of someone famous
Whistlestrop	quick
Authoritarian	strictly forcing people to obey laws
Overall	in summary
Line	official opinion
Quantify	to measure or judge, providing an amount
Brutal	cruel and violent
Persecuted	treated unfairly
Mere	used to show that something is unimportant
Simplification	making something more simple than it really is
Literacy	the ability to read and write
Drastically	extremely



Illiterate unable to read and write

Dragged out brought out of

Agrarian farming-related

Sustainably in a way that can continue

Grappling with have difficulty dealing with

Grapple with have difficulty dealing with

Knowledgeable knowing a lot

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?

Let us know in the forum community.leonardoenglish.com

