

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



Episode #589

Enshittification: Why Everything Seems To Be Getting Worse

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Transcript

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

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge, and today it's part three of our three-part mini-series on the loose theme of words and language.

[00:00:32] In case you missed them, part one was on words of the year, and part two was on euphemisms.

[00:00:39] Today, we're talking about something different altogether. We're going to be focusing on the word "enshittification".

[00:00:48] It was [coined](#)¹ in 2022 and was named Word of the Year by various dictionaries for its perfect [capture](#)² of a cultural moment.

[00:00:58] So in this episode, we'll talk about the word, what it means, why it matters, and I'll share a recent personal experience that I think is a perfect example of real-world enshittification.

[00:01:14] OK then, let's not waste a minute and get right into it.

¹ invented (for a new word or expression)

² clear representation or description

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[00:01:20] One of the best things, I think, about learning different languages is that it gives you an appreciation for the sound of different words to describe the same thing.

[00:01:34] For example, in English, we say “child” or “children” to describe a young person.

[00:01:42] It’s a perfectly good word, and if you only spoke English, you probably wouldn’t [think twice](#)³ about it.

[00:01:50] But I think several other languages better capture the [essence](#)⁴ of being a child, “Bambino” in Italian is one example. Or “niño” in Spanish. Even “barn” in Swedish, if you ask me, does a better job. It sounds more like “child” than the English word “child”.

[00:02:16] It is, of course, simply personal preference; perhaps you think the word “child” sounds more appropriate than whatever it is in your language.

[00:02:27] And when you learn another language, you realise that there are some words that don’t have a perfect translation, a word or expression with a meaning you can understand, but a translation that misses some of the [nuance](#)⁵, the [implicit](#)⁶ meaning.

³ stop and consider it carefully

⁴ the most important part, spirit or core

⁵ small differences in meaning

⁶ understood but not said directly

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[00:02:48] But sometimes, putting language learning aside for a minute, there is a word that comes along that perfectly [encapsulates](#)⁷ something that had never previously been named.

[00:03:02] One example of this is “enshittification”.

[00:03:07] It was coined in 2022 by a Canadian journalist called Cory Doctorow, and it [touched such a nerve](#)⁸ that it was made the word of the year by the American Dialect Society in 2023, then by Australia’s Macquarie Dictionary the next year, and it went on to be added to both Dictionary.com and Merriam-Webster’s lists of English words.

[00:03:36] Before I tell you what it means, let’s try to break it down and see if we can guess.

[00:03:44] So, it’s en - E N - shit - ification.

[00:03:50] There are three [component](#)⁹ parts: en, shit, and ification.

[00:03:57] En, E-N, is a [prefix](#)¹⁰ that is often related to process or action, of changing state.

⁷ expresses perfectly

⁸ caused such a strong reaction

⁹ piece of something bigger

¹⁰ letters added to the beginning of a word

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[00:04:07] Enrich means to become rich. Entrap means to become trapped. Enlarge means to become larger.

[00:04:17] If there's an "en" at the start of the word, then an adjective or a verb, there's a good chance that this word means to become that thing.

[00:04:28] Then "ification" at the end of the word, as a suffix, has a similar function, but it means "the process of making or becoming something". And importantly, it turns the word into a noun.

[00:04:46] So, simplification is the process of making something simple, clarification is the process of making something clear, and notification is the process of notifying someone about something.

[00:05:05] Then the word in the middle is perhaps not so [high-brow¹¹](#), not so formal. It's "shit", an informal and rude word for bad.

[00:05:18] Now, you will probably know that I don't tend to talk about swear words on this show, but as we are talking about "enshittification", I do need to spend a little more time talking about what "shit" really means.

[00:05:33] On the scale of swear words in British English, it's far from the worst, and although you shouldn't say it in any kind of formal or professional context, it's not deeply offensive.

¹¹ very intellectual or formal

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[00:05:49] As an adjective, it means “bad”, but it also sometimes has this [connotation](#)¹² of being frustratingly and unnecessarily low quality.

[00:06:03] So, “enshittification”, if we were to use our linguistic Sherlock Holmes detective skills, might be defined as the process of something becoming increasingly shit and frustratingly low quality.

[00:06:21] When it was coined back in 2022, it was in reference to social media and sites such as Facebook and Twitter, as it was known back then.

[00:06:33] And here was the theory, as set out by Cory Doctorow:

[00:06:39] First, a platform starts out as pretty good. It’s useful, it’s free, and it genuinely works in the interest of its users. People like it, they tell their friends, and the platform grows.

[00:06:55] Then, in order to attract businesses, the platform [shifts](#)¹³ slightly. It starts [prioritising](#)¹⁴ things that make money. Maybe showing a few ads here, [tweaking](#)¹⁵ an

¹² extra meaning or feeling

¹³ changes direction or focus

¹⁴ treating them as more important

¹⁵ making small changes

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algorithm¹⁶ there. It's not terrible, but the experience is no longer quite as good as it was.

[00:07:16] Finally, once the user base is **locked in**¹⁷ and the businesses are too, the platform **shifts** again.

[00:07:24] This time, it turns hostile to both.

[00:07:28] It **bombards**¹⁸ users with low-quality content, pushes ads in every possible corner, and quietly removes useful features. Businesses are forced to pay more to get less, and the value starts **flowing**¹⁹ to the shareholders.

[00:07:47] The platform has become worse for everyone, but it's more profitable, at least in the short term.

[00:07:55] That, Doctorow argued, is enshittification.

[00:07:59] A slow, deliberate transformation from something that people love... to something that they **can't stand**²⁰, but can't escape.

¹⁶ a system that decides what you see online

¹⁷ unwilling, unable, or unlikely to leave

¹⁸ sends too much at once

¹⁹ moving from one place to another

²⁰ really dislike

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[00:08:10] The primary example he used, and one which I imagine you will be familiar with, is Facebook.

[00:08:17] It started out as a site exclusively for Harvard students, then you needed to have a university email address, and then it was open to anyone.

[00:08:28] I remember those early days. One of my friends from school started university before I did, so in the autumn of 2005, he was able to get a Facebook account, and I wasn't. It seemed like magic; real profiles, no adverts, just authentic, unfiltered connections with friends and people you really knew.

[00:08:55] Then businesses were encouraged to create Facebook pages, whether that was your friendly neighbourhood coffee shop or the BBC News. Facebook was already where everyone was spending their time, so by creating a Facebook page and encouraging people to "follow" you, this was a new and free way to connect with your audience.

[00:09:20] Perhaps this wasn't so great for individual users.

[00:09:25] After all, people weren't really opening up Facebook to see a link to a news story or a poster about a special deal on coffee; they wanted to see their friends. But it was kind of ok.

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[00:09:40] Then Facebook started [encouraging](#)²¹ advertisers onto the platform. We have all these people. We know all of this stuff about them. If you pay us a small amount of money, you can advertise to them.

[00:09:54] Again, this wasn't terrible, but it wasn't exactly what people had signed up for. Mark Zuckerberg had initially said this wouldn't happen.

[00:10:04] And then the same thing happened to the businesses that had spent time and resources in building up their Facebook pages; Facebook now turned around and said, "well, if you want your followers to see your posts, you need to pay us to make sure that happens".

[00:10:20] Again, a bit annoying for these businesses, but they had put a lot of time and effort into their Facebook pages. It seemed like an [overreaction](#)²² to walk away now simply because Facebook wanted some money.

[00:10:35] Then it got more expensive for businesses to advertise, Facebook started [cramming](#)²³ more and more adverts, the same thing happened on Instagram, and

²¹ asking or persuading people to do it

²² a response that was too strong

²³ putting too much into a small space

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slowly but surely, the experience has **degraded**²⁴ so much from its early **iteration**²⁵ that it's hardly recognisable.

[00:10:54] Still, there hasn't been a mass **exodus**²⁶ on either side, neither by the users nor the businesses. Yes, user growth is down, and many users have left entirely.

[00:11:08] But there are still over 3 billion monthly active users, 37% of the global adult population.

[00:11:18] People have invested too much, Doctorow argued; their photos, friends, and connections are all there, and although the experience has significantly **degraded**, they don't leave.

[00:11:32] And the final element is to do with corporate value capture; all the value from the platform has **flowed**²⁷ to shareholders, turning Meta-Facebook's parent company-into a trillion-dollar business.

[00:11:48] It happened with Facebook and Instagram, and has also happened with many other social media sites, from Twitter through to Pinterest, Reddit, and TikTok.

²⁴ become worse in quality

²⁵ version

²⁶ many people leaving at the same time

²⁷ moved or gone towards

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[00:12:00] And this is enshittification; the gradual process of social media networks becoming worse and worse, or shitter and shitter, all while extracting the maximum possible value from their users.

[00:12:16] And no sooner had Doctorow coined and explained the term than it began to change shape, and people started pointing out enshittification in every aspect of life.

[00:12:30] Now, this wasn't just your classic people saying "things were better back in my day", but real-life examples of how we are often asked to pay more for something that is lower in quality.

[00:12:45] Whether that was video games forcing people to spend money on all sorts of in-game upsells, Disney Plus or Netflix doubling their prices for less content, or showing adverts even when you pay for it, or just your favourite chocolate bar getting smaller and more expensive at the same time.

[00:13:06] Even Duolingo has been accused of enshittification by getting rid of its forum, switching its [gamification](#)²⁸ system and [stuffing](#)²⁹ its free version with more ads.

[00:13:18] And it's something that's not restricted to the digital world, either; it's something you can see almost everywhere.

[00:13:27] I was reminded of this late last year in the UK.

²⁸ using game ideas to make things more engaging

²⁹ filling with too much

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[00:13:31] I was visiting my parents with my two young kids. My mother suggested that we go to a sort of farm centre, which she had heard had a nice little shop, a playground, some animals, and a place where kids could pick pumpkins for Halloween.

[00:13:50] It sounded great in theory, so off we went.

[00:13:55] It wasn't a particularly nice day weather-wise, but it was the end of October in England. A bit of wind and rain [comes with the territory](#)³⁰.

[00:14:05] We arrived, and everything seemed perfectly acceptable. We had an [unremarkable](#)³¹ coffee and snack at the cafe to [warm up](#)³², then [headed](#)³³ towards the animals. To get towards the animals, you had to walk through a little [fairground](#)³⁴, a little bit like how airports often force you to walk through the Duty Free section to get to your gate.

[00:14:29] Slightly annoying, but there we go.

[00:14:32] We arrived at the animal bit. There were a couple of sad-looking donkeys, two pigs, and that was about it. Obviously, my kids wanted to go to the [fairground](#),

³⁰ is normal for that situation

³¹ not special or interesting

³² become warmer or more comfortable

³³ went towards

³⁴ place with rides and games

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because we had been forced to walk through it, and I agreed they could do one thing [of their choosing](#)³⁵: one ride, or activity.

[00:14:53] They chose the [merry-go-round](#)³⁶, the ride where there are all of the horses and carriages that move around on a disk, with music and stuff.

[00:15:04] As we approached the [merry-go-round](#), I had seen groups of people go up to the cashier's desk and walk away [seemingly](#)³⁷ [in disgust](#)³⁸, which [didn't bode well](#)³⁹, but I figured I'd promised my kids they could go, so how bad could it be?

[00:15:22] It was only about 11 o'clock in the morning, but the man behind the desk looked like he'd been arguing with customers for hours.

[00:15:31] The price was £3 per child, but because one of my children was under 1 metre tall, I'd have to come on with him and buy my own ticket. £9 in total. A little over €10.

[00:15:47] Now, the ride itself was perfectly ok. It was a bit sad and old, the music was a bit squeaky, and the horses looked like they needed [a lick of paint](#)⁴⁰.

³⁵ that they would choose themselves

³⁶ a circular ride with horses

³⁷ appearing to be

³⁸ feeling strong dislike

³⁹ suggested something bad would happen

⁴⁰ a small improvement to appearance

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[00:15:59] Still, my kids liked it, which I guess is the most important thing.

[00:16:04] The thing was, [by the looks of](#)⁴¹ how many people had walked up to the merry-go-round and not gone on, or were standing around watching, presumably [put off](#)⁴² by the high price, it seemed to me like they could have reduced their prices significantly and had many more kids on the ride, and actually made more money overall, but instead they [extracted](#)⁴³ as much value as they possibly could from each paying customer, extremely [begrudgingly](#)⁴⁴ I must add.

[00:16:36] And if you think this was an isolated incident, it wasn't.

[00:16:41] There was a [marshmallow](#)⁴⁵ barbecue, which was a nice enough idea, but nobody was there, because they were charging £5 for a stick of what looked like around 5 small [marshmallows](#)⁴⁶.

⁴¹ judging from what could be seen

⁴² discouraged

⁴³ took out

⁴⁴ unwillingly and with annoyance

⁴⁵ a soft, sweet food

⁴⁶ soft, sweet foods

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[00:16:55] There was a “throw a [hoop⁴⁷](#) around the rubber duck” game, but nobody was there, because it was £4 for a single throw.

[00:17:04] There were, we found out later, more animals than the pair of donkeys, but these were kept in another part, and it was another £13 per person, I think, to go in. And looking at the online reviews, most people seemed to be pretty disappointed with the experience.

[00:17:25] We [decided against it⁴⁸](#) and asked the lady selling tickets how to get back to the car park, to which she responded that she didn’t know because the part she worked in was actually operated by a different company, so she didn’t have anything to do with it.

[00:17:41] Now, you might think that this is just a complaint about paying for stuff; it isn’t.

[00:17:49] I appreciate that running a business like this must be tough. You have to pay staff, rent, look after the animals, and all this costs money. And comparing costs to those of my childhood isn’t helpful, because everything has got significantly more expensive since then.

⁴⁷ a ring shaped band

⁴⁸ chose not to do it

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[00:18:07] But why I bring up this experience in the context of enshittification is that, for me, it encapsulates offline enshittification.

[00:18:20] This animal farm had **put up**⁴⁹ adverts all over the Oxford area, bringing people to it. Once they got there, they didn't want to just turn around and go home, but they **begrudgingly** stayed, paying the inflated prices for a lower-than-expected quality of experience.

[00:18:39] Every possible **corner had been cut**⁵⁰, and every possible activity cost extra.

[00:18:46] And the thing was that it doesn't have to be that way.

[00:18:51] Just a few days before this, my family and I had gone to a theme park in Sweden. The entry price was relatively high, but once you got in, it seemed like no expense had been **spared**⁵¹; there were real pumpkins **piled up high**⁵², lots of smiling staff, free shows, all this stuff that made you think that they were really trying to put on a good experience for you.

⁴⁹ placed or displayed

⁵⁰ quality was reduced to save money

⁵¹ avoided saving money on

⁵² grouped in large amounts

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[00:19:18] And this isn't just a question of Sweden vs. the UK; there is another really good animal park we'd been to with my kids a couple of years before, quite close to this other one in England, which hadn't yet [been subject to](#)⁵³ enshittification.

[00:19:36] But it is an increasing [trend](#)⁵⁴, especially in the UK, and once you notice it, you see it everywhere.

[00:19:45] So, there we go, enshittification, a word I think perfectly captures the [essence](#) of something we can see all around us.

[00:19:55] And going back to what we talked about at the start of the episode, I looked into how the term “enshittification” is translated into different languages.

[00:20:06] Most seem to keep the English version, while others do a direct translation from the English, like “Merdification” in French.

[00:20:16] This just goes to show that sometimes there is an expression that is just so perfectly accurate it can never really be translated.

[00:20:27] OK, then, that is it for today's episode on enshittification, and with that comes the end of this three-part mini-series on the theme of words and language.

[00:20:38] In case you missed them, in part one, we talked about words of the year, and in part two we talked about euphemisms in English.

⁵³ been affected by

⁵⁴ a general change happening over time

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[00:20:46] As always, I'd love to know what you think. Do you see examples of enshittification in your country? Have you had an experience of enshittification in the UK? And what can we do to fix it?

[00:20:59] I would love to know, so let's get this discussion started. You can head right into our community forum, which is at community.leonardoenglish.com and get chatting away to other curious minds.

[00:21:11] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English.

[00:21:16] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Coined	invented (for a new word or expression)
Capture	clear representation or description
Think twice	stop and consider it carefully
Essence	the most important part, spirit or core
Nuance	small differences in meaning
Implicit	understood but not said directly
Encapsulates	expresses perfectly
Touched such a nerve	caused such a strong reaction
Component	piece of something bigger
Prefix	letters added to the beginning of a word
High-brow	very intellectual or formal
Connotation	extra meaning or feeling
Shifts	changes direction or focus

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Prioritising	treating them as more important
Tweaking	making small changes
Algorithm	a system that decides what you see online
Locked in	unwilling, unable, or unlikely to leave
Bombards	sends too much at once
Flowing	moving from one place to another
Can't stand	really dislike
Encouraging	asking or persuading people to do it
Overreaction	a response that was too strong
Cramming	putting too much into a small space
Degraded	become worse in quality
Iteration	version
Exodus	many people leaving at the same time
Flowed	moved or gone towards
Gamification	using game ideas to make things more engaging

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Stuffing	filling with too much
Comes with the territory	is normal for that situation
Unremarkable	not special or interesting
Warm up	become warmer or more comfortable
Headed	went towards
Fairground	place with rides and games
Of their choosing	that they would choose themselves
Merry-go-round	a circular ride with horses
Seemingly	appearing to be
In disgust	feeling strong dislike
Didn't bode well	suggested something bad would happen
A lick of paint	a small improvement to appearance
By the looks of	judging from what could be seen
Put off	discouraged
Extracted	took out

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Begrudgingly	unwillingly and with annoyance
Marshmallow	a soft, sweet food
Marshmallows	soft, sweet foods
Hoop	a ring shaped band
Decided against it	chose not to do it
Put up	placed or displayed
Corner had been cut	quality was reduced to save money
Spared	avoided saving money on
Piled up high	grouped in large amounts
Been subject to	been affected by
Trend	a general change happening over time

Language spotlight

1. Touch a nerve

- **Meaning:** To cause a strong emotional reaction, often because the topic is sensitive or personally important.
- **Synonyms:** hit a sensitive spot, strike a chord, provoke a strong reaction
- **Antonyms:** leave someone indifferent, have no effect, fail to interest
- **Examples:**
 - The documentary about housing prices **touched a nerve** with young viewers.
 - Her comments about work–life balance **touched a nerve** in the office.

2. Get right into it

- **Meaning:** To start something immediately, without delay or unnecessary introduction.
- **Synonyms:** get straight to the point, dive straight in, begin immediately
- **Antonyms:** ease into something, delay, beat around the bush

- **Examples:**
 - We don't have much time, so let's **get right into it**.
 - After a brief greeting, the speaker **got right into** the main topic.

3. Be locked in

- **Meaning:** To be stuck in a situation that is difficult or expensive to leave.
- **Synonyms:** trapped, tied into, committed to
- **Antonyms:** free to leave, flexible, uncommitted
- **Examples:**
 - Many users feel **locked in** to the platform because all their contacts are there.
 - Once the long-term contract was signed, the company was **locked in**.

4. Cut corners

- **Meaning:** To save time or money by doing something badly or by not following proper standards.

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- **Synonyms:** take shortcuts, compromise on quality, do something cheaply
- **Antonyms:** do something properly, follow best practice, spare no expense
- **Examples:**
 - The builders **cut corners**, which caused serious problems later.
 - If you **cut corners** on safety, accidents are more likely to happen.

5. Put someone off

- **Meaning:** To discourage someone from doing something or make something seem unattractive.
- **Synonyms:** discourage, deter, make someone lose interest
- **Antonyms:** encourage, attract, appeal to
- **Examples:**
 - The high entrance fee **put many families off** visiting the park.
 - His negative attitude **put her off** joining the project.

Quiz

Listening Comprehension Multiple Choice Questions

1. Why does the speaker spend time explaining the word “shit”?
 - a) To encourage learners to use swear words
 - b) To explain its grammatical role and meaning in the new word
 - c) To compare British and American slang
 - d) To criticise informal language

2. Who coined the term “enshittification”?
 - a) A British linguist
 - b) A Silicon Valley CEO
 - c) A Canadian journalist
 - d) An American dictionary editor

3. According to the episode, what happens in the first stage of enshittification?
 - a) The platform becomes expensive

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- b) Businesses are forced to pay
 - c) Users begin to leave
 - d) The platform works well for users
4. Why do many users stay on platforms even when the experience gets worse?
- a) They don't notice the changes
 - b) They are legally required to stay
 - c) They have invested too much content and time
 - d) There are no advertisements
5. Why does the speaker describe the farm park as an example of enshittification?
- a) It was unsafe for children
 - b) The weather was bad
 - c) The staff were helpful
 - d) Prices were high and quality was low

True or False

6. The word “enshittification” was first used to describe offline businesses.
(True/False)
7. Facebook initially focused on user experience rather than profit. (True/False)
8. The speaker believes enshittification only happens online. (True/False)
9. At the farm park, most activities were included in the entry price. (True/False)
10. The episode suggests that enshittification is becoming more common.
(True/False)

Fill-in-the-Blank

11. Then the word in the middle is perhaps not so high-_____, not so formal. It’s “shit”, an informal and rude word for bad.
12. A slow, deliberate transformation from something that people love... to something that they can’t _____, but can’t escape.
13. It wasn’t a particularly nice day weather-wise, but it was the end of October in England. A bit of wind and rain comes with the _____.
14. They chose the _____-go-round, the ride where there are all of the horses and carriages that move around on a disk, with music and stuff.

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15. As we approached the merry-go-round, I had seen groups of people go up to the cashier's desk and walk away seemingly in disgust, which didn't _____ well.

Vocabulary Practice

16. What does “**encapsulate**” most nearly mean?

- a) To hide something completely
- b) To express the main idea clearly and briefly
- c) To make something more complicated
- d) To separate into parts

17. What does “**extract value**” mean in the episode?

- a) To remove unnecessary features
- b) To improve customer satisfaction
- c) To take as much profit or benefit as possible
- d) To invest money into a product

18. What does “**begrudgingly**” describe?
- a) Doing something with enthusiasm
 - b) Doing something quickly
 - c) Doing something carefully
 - d) Doing something unwillingly or with resentment
19. What does “**iteration**” refer to in the context of Facebook?
- a) A mistake made during development
 - b) A sudden change in company leadership
 - c) A particular version or stage of a product
 - d) A legal agreement
20. What does “**degraded**” most nearly mean?
- a) Become worse in quality
 - b) Changed direction
 - c) Improved slowly

d) Become more expensive

Answers

1. b) To explain its grammatical role and meaning in the new word
2. c) A Canadian journalist
3. d) The platform works well for users
4. c) They have invested too much content and time
5. d) Prices were high and quality was low
6. False
7. True
8. False
9. False
10. True
11. brow
12. stand
13. territory
14. merry
15. bode
16. b) To express the main idea clearly and briefly
17. c) To take as much profit or benefit as possible
18. d) Doing something unwillingly or with resentment
19. c) A particular version or stage of a product
20. a) Become worse in quality