ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



Episode #20
Carbon Offsetting
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Transcript

[00:00:05] Hello, hello, hello, and it's another day at the English Learning for Curious Minds podcast by Leonardo English. I'm Alastair Budge and welcome to the show.

[00:00:16] The subject of today's podcast is carbon offsetting.

[00:00:22] We'll explain what it is, how it works, why some people love it, praising it as an effective solution towards limiting climate change, while others think it is a load of rubbish, and just another example of us **kicking the can further down the road**[1].

[00:00:41] I'm quite excited about this one and it's something that's pretty close to my heart, although you'll have to wait until the end of the podcast to find out what I really think about it.

[00:00:53] Before we get right into it though, let me just take a minute to remind those of you without the key vocabulary and transcript in front of you that you can grab a copy of it and become a member of Leonardo English over on the website, which is Leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:10] Members get the transcripts and key vocabulary now also downloadable in shiny new PDF format for every podcast we've ever released, plus, of course, you'll get two new ones **zooming**[2] into your inbox every week.

[1] delaying dealing with a problem even longer

[2] arriving very quickly

[00:01:25] And in case you were not aware, the promotional early bird price of just nine euros per month is coming to an end at midnight on January the 31st, so if you want to lock in that super low promotional price, then make sure you head over and grab yourself a membership before midnight on the 31st.

[00:01:47] Head to Leonardoenglish.com/subscribe.

[00:01:52] Okay then carbon offsetting.

[00:01:55] You have probably heard of it, and you probably even have an idea about what it is.

[00:02:02] But in today's podcast we are going to **dig a little bit deeper**[3], explain how it really works, talk through some of the pros and cons, and you can make your own mind up as to whether you think it's a good idea.

[00:02:18] I'm going to skip over the part where we all agree that global warming is a huge **existential**[4] problem and we should do whatever we can to minimise our carbon footprint. I think that's almost a given.

[3] look at the subject in more detail

[4] threatening the survival of humanity

[00:02:33] So carbon offsetting is one way that has been proposed for mainly Western countries that are pumping carbon into the atmosphere to offset, to **counteract**[5] their actions by paying for **initiatives**[6] that reduce the amount of carbon in the atmosphere.

[00:02:55] Either **initiatives** that stop carbon going into the air in the first place or that remove, that take out, CO2 from the atmosphere.

[00:03:07] The idea is that you have a 'carbon damage' balance, so that's the amount of carbon that you're responsible for putting into the air, which can be from driving a car, taking planes, heating or cooling your home, eating meat, or doing anything else that is putting carbon into the air.

[00:03:30] And then you have a 'carbon repair' balance, which is the amount of carbon that you are responsible for taking out of the atmosphere, either through doing things that actually take CO2 out of the atmosphere, like planting trees, which **absorb**[7] CO2 or through not putting it into the atmosphere in the first place, so for example, **financing**[8] clean energy projects, so that the energy is generated without emitting carbon in the first place.

[5] reduce or cancel out the effect of

[6] new plans or projects to deal with a problem

[7] take in

[8] providing the money for

[00:04:03] To go what is called 'carbon neutral', your carbon damage minus your carbon repair needs to be below zero, think of it like a bank balance. This typically happens by people paying for carbon repair in the form of carbon offsets.

[00:04:25] So when you hear about rock stars, companies or even countries saying that they are carbon neutral, it doesn't mean that they are responsible for no emissions, but it means that their emissions or their carbon damage is offset by the carbon repair activities they are doing.

[00:04:49] The slightly strange thing about this is that it's perfectly possible to fly all the way around the world on a private jet and burn coal all day long, but if you pay enough to offset these activities, technically you are still carbon neutral.

[00:05:10] What's more the cost of these carbon repair, these carbon offsetting activities, on a personal level is actually probably quite a lot less than you might think.

[00:05:23] Offsetting a return flight from London to San Francisco, for example, would be about 20 pounds and offsetting a year's driving might be another 20 pounds, depending on the type of car that you drive of course.

[00:05:40] Add all of these up to calculate the cost on a personal level, and it might seem like quite a small price to pay for the prize of saving the planet.

[00:05:52] So it all sounds pretty good in theory, if we all just knew our carbon damage and made sure that it was offset by our carbon repair, is that just the solution to global warming?

[00:06:08] Well, no, it's not quite so simple.

[00:06:13] Despite its apparent simplicity, carbon offsetting has **its fair share**[9] of **critics**[10] and for some valid reasons.

[00:06:23] George Monbiot, a famous environmental journalist from the British newspaper The Guardian compared it to the ancient Catholic church's practice of selling indulgences, which is where you would be **absolved**[11], you'd be forgiven for your sins, and you would have reduced time in **purgatory**[12], in return for financial donations, in return for money given to the church.

[00:06:53] He said that carbon offsets allow us to buy **complacency**[13], political **apathy**[14] and self-satisfaction.

[00:07:04] In plain English, it means that if there is an option for people to just pay the fine, to pay up, in exchange for their bad behaviour, they will just do it.

[9] quite a lot

[10] people who say what they think is wrong with it

[11] officially freed from blame or guilt

[12] in Catholic belief, a place where souls suffer for a time before reaching heaven

[13] a feeling of being too satisfied to see any need to change

[14] lack of interest or concern

[00:07:17] It allows people to continue to engage in all of these activities that are very carbon-heavy, and are big contributors to global warming, but not feel guilty because they are now carbon neutral as they have paid to offset their carbon.

[00:07:36] You want to take a flight for a weekend away? Sure, you shouldn't feel bad about it because you can offset your carbon.

[00:07:44] The criticism is that it doesn't address the **root cause**[15] of global warming and in order to have any chance of reducing the carbon in the atmosphere, people's behaviour needs to change.

[00:07:59] By promoting carbon offsets, the argument goes, there is no **incentive**[16] for people's behaviour to change.

[00:08:08] What's more, it's actually going the other way as society is saying that it's acceptable to just pay up and offset it.

[00:08:17] People often make the comparison between carbon offsetting and things like daycare centre late fees where in order to **deter**[17], to **discourage**[18], parents from being late, from picking up their children from daycare, from nursery, some daycare centres started to add fines, financial punishments, every time a parent was late.

[15] a basic reason behind a problem

[16] a reason that encourages someone to do something

[17] persuade people not to do something by making them fear the result

[18] try to stop people from doing something

[00:08:46] It was intended to be a **deterrent**[19], to reduce the amount of times that parents were late to pick up their children, but actually had completely the opposite effect.

[00:08:58] The frequency of parents being late actually increased because they felt they could just pay the fine and get on with it.

[00:09:09] Critics of carbon offsetting also claimed that many projects will only have positive effects five, ten or twenty years **down the line**[20], in the future.

[00:09:20] This is especially the case for things like tree planting.

[00:09:25] Trees, obviously don't **grow overnight**[21], so even if you pay for tree planting now, it won't have any effect on your carbon footprint for many years and a tonne of carbon taken out of the sky today is worth much more than one taken out of the sky in five, ten or twenty years' time.

[00:09:50] Now, in fact, the majority of carbon offsetting programmes have switched to more short-term wins, to quicker wins, from things like investing in clean energy to **distributing**[22] more efficient cooking **stoves**[23].

[19] a thing that makes people decide not to do something

[20] at a later time

[21] get big in a very short time

[22] giving out

[23] pieces of equipment that are used for cooking food

[00:10:08] So they switched to things where there is an immediate impact, and in many cases it's also a little bit more measurable.

[00:10:17] But even with these, there's an additional problem, which is that it's often difficult to prove that the carbon offsetting schemes that have been put in place have actually had any positive impact or rather have had an impact that wouldn't have happened anyway.

[00:10:36] For example, if there is a scheme that encourages people in a certain area to **switch**[24] to an energy efficient light bulb, how can you really know whether people in that area wouldn't have switched anyway?

[00:10:53] Yes, it's a good thing that they are using energy efficient light bulbs, but if they'd have made that switch anyway, then there's no point in paying to offset it if the behaviour would have happened **in any case**[25].

[00:11:08] It also encourages the local government in the places where these offset **initiatives** are taking place not to engage in any of these kinds of activities if it knows that these activities will be done by others through carbon offsetting.

[00:11:26] There's also the other criticism, similar to the criticism that is **leveled**[26] at lots of charitable giving, which is you never know quite how efficient it is.

[24] change

[25] anyway, even without the payment

[26] aimed or directed

[00:11:39] If you are giving $20 to offset something through a clean cooking project in Botswana, you have no idea how efficient your carbon offsetting is.

[00:11:51] You'll never go there to check and there have been some bad **operators**[27] in the carbon offsetting market that have **sullied**[28], that have damaged the reputation of the industry.

[00:12:07] These are, of course, all valid concerns and the carbon offsetting industry has **stepped up to the mark**[29] and implemented some **rigorous**[30] standards and **accreditations**[31] for carbon offsetting programmes.

[00:12:21] A bit like fair trade or organic food.

[00:12:25] This has done a lot to **clamp down**[32] on bad actors and has meant that, in theory at least, carbon offsetting should be more efficient, more transparent, and that more of the money goes towards projects that actually have a positive effect instead of either just going into someone's pocket or being wasted **altogether**[33].

[00:12:48] So what is the answer?

[27] companies or people that run a business
[28] spoiled or damaged
[29] taken responsibility and done what was needed
[30] very strict and careful
[31] official approvals showing that something reaches a required level
[32] take strong action to stop or limit
[33] completely

[00:12:52] Is carbon offsetting a good thing or is it just another way for people to pay to not think about their polluting activities and to not change their behaviour **in the slightest**[34]?

[00:13:06] Well, it's of course not black and white and there isn't a **one size fits all**[35] answer.

[00:13:13] If you are someone that is just paying to offset their carbon and not changing your behaviour in any way, or worse, if you think that carbon offsetting allows you to behave in a more polluting way because you can just pay to offset it, then that's obviously not really a good thing at all.

[00:13:34] You can make the argument that it's slightly better than not offsetting anything, but it doesn't address the root cause, which is the need for behaviour change.

[00:13:44] But if you carbon offset as a part of a strategy to reduce your overall emissions and do that as well as changing some of your behaviour, then that **inevitably**[36] has to be a good thing.

[00:14:00] On a personal level, I started offsetting my carbon emissions about a year ago.

[34] at all; even a little

[35] suitable for every person or situation

[36] certainly; in a way that cannot be avoided

[00:14:06] Money just comes out of my account every month. And yes, it does make me feel a little bit less bad about my own environmental impact, but it's also part of a wider effort that I am making to reduce my footprint.

[00:14:20] And if you are interested in this, there are loads of different services you can check out that will help you calculate your own carbon footprint and offset it if you choose.

[00:14:32] The one I use, which I definitely recommend is called project Wren. W. R. E. N.

[00:14:38] It's a site that allows you to give a bit of information about your lifestyle, then it will help you select projects that will help you offset your carbon footprint.

[00:14:49] It's a pretty cool one, and I'll leave a link in the show notes if you're interested.

[00:14:53] One final benefit that a lot of new carbon offsetting programmes have is what is called co-benefits meaning that carbon offsetting has an additional benefit **over and above**[37] the carbon benefit.

[00:15:10] For example, providing employment in an area or providing an **enlarged**[38] habitat for wildlife. So they are double wins, I guess, and with this, I think it's quite hard to argue.

[37] in addition to; more than

[38] made bigger

[00:15:25] Okay then I hope that this has been an interesting dive into the world of carbon offsetting.

[00:15:32] As you now know, it's not that simple.

[00:15:36] We've also only just touched the surface of carbon offsetting, and I hope you will excuse me for **skimming over**[39] some other pretty important parts.

[00:15:47] As I said at the start of the podcast, if you are interested in becoming a member of Leonardo English and getting the transcripts and key vocabulary for this podcast and for every podcast we've ever done and two new podcasts a week, then our promotional price of just nine euros per month is coming to an end at midnight on January the 31st so that's exactly a week from the day that this podcast is coming out.

[00:16:15] They can be the most amazing resource in terms of understanding every word in the podcast, and if you are using this as a real learning resource that it's definitely worth checking out.

[00:16:28] You can find out more at leonardoenglish.com/subscribe.

[00:16:33] And finally on the subject of carbon offsetting, if you were thinking about jumping on a plane to an English speaking country and taking a course and considering that against a membership of Leonardo English and learning through podcasts, handy transcripts and learning resources, then of course, becoming a member of Leonardo

[39] dealing only briefly and without much detail with

English and not taking the flight will not only save you a load of money, but be better for your carbon footprint.

[00:17:01] Okay. I know that one might be a little bit **tenuous**[40], but you **get my drift**[41].

[00:17:06] I think we'll just end it there.

[00:17:08] You've been listening to the English Learning for Curious Minds podcast by Leonardo English.

[00:17:14] I'm Alastair Budge and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

[END OF EPISODE]

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[40] weak and not very convincing

[41] understand the general meaning of what I am saying

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Kicking the can further down the road	delaying dealing with a problem even longer
Zooming	arriving very quickly
Dig a little bit deeper	look at the subject in more detail
Existential	threatening the survival of humanity
Counteract	reduce or cancel out the effect of
Initiatives	new plans or projects to deal with a problem
Absorb	take in
Financing	providing the money for
Its fair share	quite a lot

Critics	people who say what they think is wrong with it
Absolved	officially freed from blame or guilt
Purgatory	in Catholic belief, a place where souls suffer for a time before reaching heaven
Complacency	a feeling of being too satisfied to see any need to change
Apathy	lack of interest or concern
Root cause	a basic reason behind a problem
Incentive	a reason that encourages someone to do something
Deter	persuade people not to do something by making them fear the result
Discourage	try to stop people from doing something
Deterrent	a thing that makes people decide not to do something
Down the line	at a later time
Grow overnight	get big in a very short time

Distributing	giving out
Stoves	pieces of equipment that are used for cooking food
Switch	change
In any case	anyway, even without the payment
Leveled	aimed or directed
Operators	companies or people that run a business
Sullied	spoiled or damaged
Stepped up to the mark	taken responsibility and done what was needed
Rigorous	very strict and careful
Accreditations	official approvals showing that something reaches a required level
Clamp down	take strong action to stop or limit

Altogether	completely
In the slightest	at all; even a little
One size fits all	suitable for every person or situation
Inevitably	certainly; in a way that cannot be avoided
Over and above	in addition to; more than
Enlarged	made bigger
Skimming over	dealing only briefly and without much detail with
Tenuous	weak and not very convincing
Get my drift	understand the general meaning of what I am saying

Language spotlight

1. Kick the can down the road

- **Meaning**: To delay dealing with a problem instead of solving it now.
- **Synonyms**: put off, postpone, delay
- **Antonyms**: tackle head-on, deal with straight away, face up to
- **Examples**:
    - The council keeps **kicking the can down the road** instead of repairing the old bridge.
    - If we **kick the can down the road** on this budget problem, it will only get worse.

2. Dig a little bit deeper

- **Meaning**: To look at or investigate something in more detail.
- **Synonyms**: look more closely, explore further, investigate
- **Antonyms**: skim the surface, gloss over, take at face value
- **Examples**:
    - The results looked fine, but when the journalist **dug a little bit deeper**, she found several mistakes.
    - Before you buy the car, it's worth **digging a little bit deeper** into its history.

3. Have its fair share of

- **Meaning**: To have quite a lot of something, usually something negative.
- **Synonyms**: have plenty of, have a good number of, have no shortage of
- **Antonyms**: have very few, have hardly any, be free of
- **Examples**:
    - The old house has had **its fair share of** problems over the years.
    - Every new manager has **their fair share of** doubts in the first month.

4. Step up to the mark

- **Meaning**: To take responsibility and do what is needed, especially when a situation is difficult.
- **Synonyms**: rise to the occasion, take responsibility, rise to the challenge
- **Antonyms**: let people down, fall short, back away
- **Examples**:
    - When the captain was injured, the youngest player **stepped up to the mark** and led the team.
    - We need someone to **step up to the mark** and organise the event.

5. Get my drift

- **Meaning**: To understand the general meaning of what someone is saying, even if it is not said directly.
- **Synonyms**: understand what I mean, follow me, see what I'm getting at
- **Antonyms**: misunderstand, miss the point, lose the thread
- **Examples**:
    - I'm not saying he's lazy, but he hasn't done much work this week, if you **get my drift**.
    - She didn't explain it fully, but I **got her drift**.

Quiz

Listening Comprehension Multiple Choice Questions

1. What is the basic idea of carbon offsetting?

a) Banning activities that put carbon into the air

b) Paying for projects that reduce carbon to balance out your own emissions

c) Moving polluting factories to countries with fewer people

d) Taxing the countries that produce the most carbon

2. Roughly how much does Alastair say it would cost to offset a return flight from London to San Francisco?

a) About 2 pounds

b) About 200 pounds

c) About 2,000 pounds

d) About 20 pounds

3. What did George Monbiot compare carbon offsetting to?

a) The old Catholic church practice of selling indulgences

b) Paying a fine for parking in the wrong place

c) Buying a ticket for a lottery

d) Buying insurance against bad weather

4. What happened when some daycare centres started fining parents who were late?

a) Parents almost completely stopped being late

b) Parents complained and the fines were removed

c) Parents were late more often than before

d) Nothing changed at all

5. Why have many carbon offsetting programmes moved away from projects like tree planting?

a) Trees are too expensive to plant in large numbers

b) Trees take many years to have an effect on carbon

c) Local governments refused to allow tree planting

d) Trees were found to release more carbon than they take in

True or False

6. Being carbon neutral means you are responsible for no carbon emissions at all. (True/False)

7. It is technically possible to fly around the world on a private jet and still be carbon neutral. (True/False)

8. Many programmes switched to projects such as cooking stoves because they have a more immediate impact. (True/False)

9. The carbon offsetting industry has introduced standards and accreditations for its programmes. (True/False)

10. Alastair says he has never offset his own carbon emissions. (True/False)

Fill in the Blanks

11. Despite its apparent simplicity, carbon offsetting has its fair _____ of critics and for some valid reasons.

12. Trees, obviously don't grow _____, so even if you pay for tree planting now, it won't have any effect on your carbon footprint for many years

13. the carbon offsetting industry has stepped up to the ____ and implemented some rigorous standards and accreditations for carbon offsetting programmes.

14. This has done a lot to clamp ____ on bad actors

15. I know that one might be a little bit tenuous, but you get my _____.

Vocabulary Practice

16. What does "**apathy**" mean in George Monbiot's criticism of carbon offsets?

a) Strong anger

b) Careful planning

c) Lack of interest or concern

d) Deep sadness

17. What does "**deterrent**" mean in the story about daycare centre fines?

a) A thing that makes people decide not to do something

b) A reward given for good behaviour

c) A record of how often something happens

d) A rule that everyone ignores

18. What does "**rigorous**" mean when Alastair describes the new standards?

a) Relaxed and flexible

b) Old-fashioned

c) Expensive

d) Very strict and careful

19. What does "**sullied**" mean when Alastair talks about bad operators?

a) Improved

b) Spoiled or damaged

c) Hidden

d) Measured

20. What does "**tenuous**" mean near the end of the podcast?

a) Weak and not very convincing

b) Very funny

c) Completely false

d) Clear and obvious

Answers

1. b) Paying for projects that reduce carbon to balance out your own emissions
2. d) About 20 pounds
3. a) The old Catholic church practice of selling indulgences
4. c) Parents were late more often than before
5. b) Trees take many years to have an effect on carbon
6. False
7. True
8. True
9. True
10. False
11. share
12. overnight
13. mark
14. down
15. drift
16. c) Lack of interest or concern
17. a) A thing that makes people decide not to do something
18. d) Very strict and careful

19. b) Spoiled or damaged

20. a) Weak and not very convincing