ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



Episode #565
How I Make Podcast Episodes
28th Aug, 2025

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Transcript

[00:00:04] 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 we have an unusual type of episode.

[00:00:27] I'm not going to talk about a person's life, a historical event, or some other weird and wonderful thing going on in the world.

[00:00:35] Today, I'm going to talk to you about how I choose, research, write and produce podcast episodes, and how this process has changed over the past almost six years of doing so.

[00:00:49] I've had quite a few requests for this type of episode, and a few weeks ago, I got it again from an interesting Brazilian member called Itamar.

[00:00:58] So, Itamar, and to everyone else listening to this, I hope you'll enjoy this slightly **meta**[1] type of episode. I'm also going to share **a bunch of**[2] things I found out about the kind of people who listen to this podcast from a recent survey, so I think you might find that interesting, too.

[00:01:16] OK then, let's get right into it.

[1] talking about itself; here, about how this show is made

[2] a lot of

[00:01:20] Depending on the way you calculate it, there are almost 5 million different podcasts.

[00:01:27] Not individual podcast episodes; 5 million podcasts, 5 million different shows.

[00:01:35] As I'm sure you know, there are podcasts about everything: comedy, TV shows, business, football, **knitting**[3], fishing, **obscure**[4] historical periods, and, **lest I forget**[5], podcasts that help you learn a language.

[00:01:52] English Learning for Curious Minds–this podcast–is one of those.

[00:01:57] Of course, it isn't the only one. There are **tonnes of**[6] different podcasts that help you learn English, and they tend to follow similar formats.

[00:02:08] Some are conversation-based, with two teachers having a conversation about anything from their personal lives to a particular element of English grammar or language.

[00:02:20] Others might be one person giving motivational advice, or giving what's essentially an English lesson in an audio format.

[00:02:30] This one is a little different.

[3] making clothes from wool using two long needles

[4] not well known

[5] so that I do not forget to mention them

[6] a very large number of

[00:02:34] My **approach**[7] right from the start has always been to present an interesting and thought-provoking subject in a way that allows you to learn English through listening to the episode, and allows you to learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as you improve your English.

[00:02:56] This is now episode 565, so I have had quite a bit of practice making them.

[00:03:03] And in this **meta** episode, I'll tell you what I've learned and what the process of making an episode looks like now.

[00:03:13] So, let's go back to the start.

[00:03:16] When I first started, almost six years ago now, I had absolutely no idea what I was doing.

[00:03:24] I had quite a good idea of what I wanted the finished product to look like–a 15- to 20-minute episode that was both interesting and helped people improve their English–but I didn't have much of an idea about how to actually make one.

[00:03:41] So…I just started, and **figured**[8] I'd make it up as I went along.

[00:03:48] I chose some topics that I thought might be interesting, I did **a bunch of** research into them, and I pulled up Google Docs and just started **typing**[9].

[7] way of doing something

[8] thought; decided

[9] writing using a keyboard

[00:03:59] When I thought they were good enough, I recorded them using a microphone I borrowed from a friend.

[00:04:06] Then I listened to them again and…I thought they sounded awful.

[00:04:12] Firstly, like most people, I really didn't like the sound of my own voice.

[00:04:18] And secondly, I thought the content of the episodes themselves sounded **dull**[10]. I wouldn't want to listen to them, so why should anyone else?

[00:04:29] In fact, I never released these early episodes. They were on topics I now realise were pretty difficult to make interesting in an audio-only format: there was one on how black holes work, and another one on how the international **bond**[11] market works.

[00:04:48] Interesting and important subjects, sure, but quite hard to turn into an interesting topic for someone at B1 or B2 level.

[00:04:58] So, I **scrapped**[12] them - they simply never **saw the light of day**[13].

[00:05:04] I decided to choose some slightly easier subjects to **tackle**[14], and things that I was more familiar with, and **got cracking**[15].

[10] boring; not interesting

[11] a type of loan that governments and companies sell to investors

[12] got rid of; decided not to use

[13] were released or shown to the public

[14] deal with; work on

[15] started working quickly and with energy

[00:05:14] That was in December 2019, coming on 6 years ago now, and I have just kept going, with a few changes and improvements along the way.

[00:05:25] So, how does it work now?

[00:05:29] Well, first comes the idea for the topic.

[00:05:33] If you are a **seasoned**[16] listener to this show, you'll know that we've covered a lot of different subjects.

[00:05:40] There's been everything from episodes about the life of disappeared English **aristocrats**[17] through to stories about the Vikings, how recycling works, conspiracies from ancient times, the list goes on.

[00:05:54] There are only really three things that need to be true for me to decide that they are **worthy of**[18] an episode.

[00:06:02] Firstly, I need to find the subject interesting. Whether that means it's an interesting story about a period of history, about someone who lived a particularly interesting or important life, or about a particularly interesting **concept**[19], it needs to be interesting to me.

[16] experienced, having listened for a long time

[17] people from the highest social class

[18] good enough to deserve

[19] a general idea

[00:06:23] Secondly, it shouldn't be about current affairs or a topic that will become **irrelevant**[20] in weeks or months to come. My hope is that anyone can go through our library of episodes and choose one that we might have made several years ago, but it will be just as relevant today as it was when it was made. So something like King Henry VIII or Cleopatra - realistically, that isn't going to change much, so it makes for a good **candidate**[21].

[00:06:57] And thirdly, it shouldn't be about a highly **controversial**[22] or **divisive**[23] topic. I try to be as **apolitical**[24] as possible in this show, within reason, and there are some topics that I know with complete certainty would end up **flooding**[25] my inbox with angry messages on both sides of the argument. I'm sure you can imagine what might fit into that category.

[00:07:23] There are a few other things I take into consideration too, like whether a story can be properly told in an audio-only format. Some, like if you are talking about works of art or geographical borders, just don't work quite so well without images, so I'll also take that into consideration, and that's the reason there aren't many episodes about art.

[00:07:49] We also now make one three-part mini-series every month.

[20] not important or useful any more

[21] a possible choice; something that could be chosen

[00:07:54] Sometimes these will be about three different subjects that are all on a similar theme, but sometimes there will be a story that I just don't think can be properly told in a single 20-minute episode, like the one on the Cambridge Five spy ring. This started as a **standalone**[26], single episode, but I ended up **splitting**[27] it into three different episodes, a three-part mini-series.

[00:08:23] So, once a topic is chosen, what next?

[00:08:27] Well, I'll usually try to get as much of an understanding of the story or the topic as possible before writing anything down.

[00:08:37] This might start with something as basic as **skimming over**[28] a Wikipedia entry to try to get an overview of the topic, before going into more detail about particular events or parts of the story, reading opinion pieces, downloading datasets and trying to make sense of them, reading books on the topic, it can be anything that helps me understand the topic better.

[00:09:01] Sometimes I start from a position of relative knowledge, if I'm writing about something I already know about. I started this show while living in Malta. I lived there

[22] causing a lot of public disagreement

[23] causing people to split into groups that disagree strongly

[24] not taking any side in politics

[25] filling with a huge number of things

[26] complete on its own; not part of a series

[27] dividing

[28] reading quickly to get the main ideas of

for seven years and made several episodes about things related to Malta, so I was able to write most of those without too much **prior**[29] research.

[00:09:24] And I'll often make episodes about people or historical events I'm already reading about, so I'll be reading a book for fun, taking notes, and then when it comes to writing the episode of English Learning for Curious Minds, I just **refer back**[30] to my notes, and the process is **a whole lot**[31] simpler.

[00:09:45] Once I feel relatively comfortable with my own knowledge of the subject, I'll make a **rough**[32] plan and start writing.

[00:09:54] A **rough** plan for me is a very simple collection of five or so **bullet points**[33], with general ideas of how I want the episode to develop. Sometimes it's easy, like if it's about the story of someone's life, which typically follows a **chronological**[34] order, but sometimes it's harder, and it takes a bit more time and thought to get it right.

[00:10:20] Then, I start writing.

[00:10:23] When I first started, I would write out general **bullet points** rather than the entire script, but when it came to recording, I found this meant I spent more time

[29] earlier; done before
[30] return for information
[31] much; a great deal
[32] not detailed; giving only the main ideas
[33] short items in a list, each marked with a dot
[34] arranged in the order in which events happened

pausing and repeating certain parts in a different way, so now I write out the entire script, and I simply read it out loud.

[00:10:46] But I write as I speak, or at least I try to, so my hope is for an episode to sound more like a conversation, more like natural speech, than a formal written article read aloud.

[00:11:02] As you can probably tell, I use a range of different vocabulary and expressions. There is no particular **grand science**[35] to this, but I try to use language that someone at a B1 level could understand **at a bit of a stretch**[36], language that someone at a C1 level could understand almost entirely, but that anyone at B1 to C1 level will learn from.

[00:11:31] This means not artificially **dumbing down**[37] my language or using simple terms, but I might say something twice in two different ways — first naturally, and then in another, simpler way that will help you understand if you didn't the first time.

[00:11:52] I speak more clearly than I would if I were speaking to a native speaker, and of course, I make sure that all of the more complicated words and phrases are clearly defined in our transcripts and study packs.

[35] complicated, carefully planned method

[36] with some effort; only just

[37] making too simple, so that it loses some of its quality

[00:12:06] There are around 100 of these advanced words and phrases per episode, so that's more than 50,000 different definitions created, and when you remove the **duplicates**[38], the ones that have appeared twice or more, there's something like 20,000 B2 and above words that you'd learn if you listened to every episode.

[00:12:29] Now, in terms of length, I aim to make each episode around 20 minutes long, with some **coming in**[39] slightly under that and others a little over, which means the script should be between 2,500 and 3,000 words long.

[00:12:49] I try to write the script **in one go**[40], and this writing process typically takes anywhere from two to five hours. It's rarely less than two, sometimes it can be much more than 5, but it **tends**[41] to fall into that two-to-five-hour **bracket**[42].

[00:13:09] Now, you might think this is quick, or you might think it's a long time, but all I'll say is that it used to take me a lot longer. After doing it 565 times and writing well over a million words, I've had quite a lot of practice, so it would be strange if I hadn't got quicker.

[00:13:31] And this brings me on to another important point.

[38] copies; things that appear more than once

[39] ending up, when measured

[40] all at once, without stopping

[41] is usually likely

[42] range between two limits

[00:13:35] At various points over the years, I have tried **a bunch of** things to speed up the process.

[00:13:42] I've experimented with hiring external scriptwriters to write episodes of English Learning for Curious Minds. I posted a job for this once and got more than 500 applicants, and I **trialled**[43] 30 different ones.

[00:13:58] Unfortunately–or perhaps fortunately–I never managed to find someone who was able to write to a level of quality that I was happy with, and that I felt was true to my voice and style, the voice and style of this podcast.

[00:14:14] In every case, when I would review the script that they had written, I found myself making so many edits and changes to their drafts, and starting to record an episode and realising that something they had written didn't sound like me, that I realised it would have been quicker for me to just write everything **from scratch**[44].

[00:14:37] So that is now what I do: no external scriptwriters, everything on this show is written by me, Alastair.

[00:14:46] I do, however, have another scriptwriting colleague, in the form of various AI models I use to help me at different points in the planning and writing process.

[43] tested to see how good they were

[44] from the very beginning, without using anything already done

[00:14:58] Specifically, I primarily use ChatGPT, Claude and Grok, but I'll sometimes use other tools as well for a second or third opinion on something.

[00:15:09] During the planning stage, I will often tell ChatGPT what my proposed outline is, and ask it to point out areas I hadn't thought about.

[00:15:20] If I get **writer's block**[45], and I'm just not sure where to go next in a script, I might paste in what I've written **thus far**[46] and ask it to give me three different routes to take it next.

[00:15:34] I don't always use what the AI suggests, and if I do use them, I often find myself having to rewrite much of what ChatGPT provided, but they can be useful for giving me a fresh idea and helping me get **back on track**[47].

[00:15:52] I have, by the way, tested multiple times trying to get ChatGPT to actually write episodes in my voice. It does a better job than most of the human scriptwriters I've previously worked with, but it still sounds far too **artificial**[48], too unlike me, so I use it more as a **sounding board**[49], an editor and a review tool rather than a tool to write episode scripts.

[45] a state of being unable to think of what to write

[46] so far; until now

[47] back to making good progress

[48] not natural; fake

[49] something you try your ideas on to get a reaction

[00:16:22] Now, when I've finished the draft of an episode, I'll typically wait at least 24 hours, preferably more like two or three days, and then I'll return to the script. I'll review it myself, spend a couple more hours making changes, and I'll also paste the entire thing into two or three different AI tools and ask them to do everything from fact-checking to grammar checking, and to give me feedback on the **narrative arc**[50], things that I've missed, and so on.

[00:16:55] I don't always act on the feedback, but it certainly is useful to have it there as a second or even third opinion, albeit a non-human one.

[00:17:08] And then, once I am happy with it, I'll press record.

[00:17:12] I almost always find something I'm unhappy with during the recording process, so I have to stop the recording and rewrite that bit of the script before re-recording it, but once that is done, my work with the script is over, and it's passed to our audio editor before being passed to our in-house teacher who creates all the in-line vocabulary definitions, and the accompanying study pack.

[00:17:39] And…that, I guess, is it.

[00:17:44] It isn't a huge secret or special sauce, but rather the product of doing something more than 500 times.

[50] the way a story develops from beginning to end

[00:17:53] Still, there are many times when I listen to something again and think "eugh, I should have said that in a different way, or it would have been interesting to have talked about x instead of y".

[00:18:06] I try not to listen to the episodes again, because I know that if I did this, I'd be constantly worrying about going back to change certain things, and that would mean that there wasn't any time for making new ones.

[00:18:22] And I also now don't really look too much at how many people listened to certain episodes, especially not on YouTube. As you probably know, the algorithms on tools like YouTube and Spotify tend to **gravitate**[51] towards **clickbaity**[52] and extreme titles and subjects, so that's why you see people making episodes about things like "10 English Words You Have To Know Today!" or "This Is Why You Can't Speak English".

[00:18:52] I know that I don't want to make episodes about those sorts of things, and if I did, it would attract the wrong types of people to the show.

[00:19:02] What's more, I often receive emails from people telling me how much they enjoyed episodes that didn't do nearly as well in terms of downloads, so I now pay very little attention to the download numbers.

[00:19:16] What I do pay attention to, however, is what you, the wonderful listeners of this show and members of Leonardo English, tell me. So let me finish this slightly **meta**

[51] be naturally pulled

[52] made to attract clicks, often in a misleading way

episode by sharing some interesting facts from this big survey that hundreds of you were so kind to fill out at the end of July.

[00:19:38] So, the most popular countries in terms of listeners are Spain, China, Brazil, Italy and Germany.

[00:19:47] Most listeners are over the age of 35.

[00:19:51] 69% of you say you listen for pleasure, while 47% list work as a reason.

[00:20:00] 75% of you also read books in English, and 66% of you watch TV or films in English.

[00:20:09] Only 12% of you go to an English-language school.

[00:20:14] 71% of you listen to other English podcasts–well done–and 65% of you say your biggest challenge is speaking fluently, no surprise there.

[00:20:27] I asked for feedback on how we could improve the show.

[00:20:31] There were some wonderful suggestions, but quite a few examples of the wide variety of people who listen to this podcast, and how you can't please everyone.

[00:20:42] A bunch of you said you wanted more episodes about British society and culture, and about the same number of you said you wanted fewer.

[00:20:52] Almost as many of you said you wanted shorter episodes as said you wanted longer episodes, and there were as many of you who requested more complicated vocabulary as those of you who said you found it too hard to understand.

[00:21:07] We will, most probably, introduce some shorter episodes, and there are lots of more specific pieces of feedback that I'll definitely be **incorporating**[53] into the show, but these are just a few examples of how you can't please everyone, and sometimes how you have to just do what feels right…

[00:21:28] And very interestingly, of those of you who are members, 70% said you use your membership either every day or several times a week, which just goes to show that it really is very useful to many of you.

[00:21:44] So, there we go, a **peek**[54] behind the curtain, a look inside how these episodes are made.

[00:21:51] I get pretty regular emails from people saying that they are thinking of starting a similar type of podcast in Spanish or French or Italian, and asking me for "the secret sauce" of how to do it. As you can see, there really isn't a secret, but it's the product of doing something pretty much every day for five years.

[00:22:14] If you are thinking of starting a podcast like this in your own language — whether it's Spanish, French, Chinese, whatever — my biggest piece of advice is just to

[53] adding; including as a part

[54] a quick look

start. Don't worry if the first episodes aren't perfect. As you now know, mine certainly weren't.

[00:22:31] And as a final thought, thank you for listening, and an especially big thank you to those of you who are members or who have ever bought a course or one of our products.

[00:22:42] This show literally wouldn't be possible without you.

[00:22:47] OK then, that's it for this meta episode on how I make podcast episodes. I hope it was an interesting one, that you learned something new, and don't worry, regular service will **resume**[55] from the next episode.

[00:23:00] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English.

[00:23:05] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

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[55] start again after a pause

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Meta	talking about itself; here, about how this show is made
A bunch of	a lot of
Knitting	making clothes from wool using two long needles
Obscure	not well known
Lest I forget	so that I do not forget to mention them
Tonnes of	a very large number of
Approach	way of doing something
Figured	thought; decided
Typing	writing using a keyboard
Dull	boring; not interesting

Bond	a type of loan that governments and companies sell to investors
Scrapped	got rid of; decided not to use
Saw the light of day	were released or shown to the public
Tackle	deal with; work on
Got cracking	started working quickly and with energy
Seasoned	experienced, having listened for a long time
Aristocrats	people from the highest social class
Worthy of	good enough to deserve
Concept	a general idea
Irrelevant	not important or useful any more
Candidate	a possible choice; something that could be chosen
Controversial	causing a lot of public disagreement

Divisive	causing people to split into groups that disagree strongly
Apolitical	not taking any side in politics
Flooding	filling with a huge number of things
Standalone	complete on its own; not part of a series
Splitting	dividing
Skimming over	reading quickly to get the main ideas of
Prior	earlier; done before
Refer back	return for information
A whole lot	much; a great deal
Rough	not detailed; giving only the main ideas
Bullet points	short items in a list, each marked with a dot
Chronological	arranged in the order in which events happened

Grand science	complicated, carefully planned method
At a bit of a stretch	with some effort; only just
Dumbing down	making too simple, so that it loses some of its quality
Duplicates	copies; things that appear more than once
Coming in	ending up, when measured
In one go	all at once, without stopping
Tends	is usually likely
Bracket	range between two limits
Trialled	tested to see how good they were
From scratch	from the very beginning, without using anything already done
Writer's block	a state of being unable to think of what to write
Thus far	so far; until now

Back on track	back to making good progress
Artificial	not natural; fake
Sounding board	something you try your ideas on to get a reaction
Narrative arc	the way a story develops from beginning to end
Gravitate	be naturally pulled
Clickbaity	made to attract clicks, often in a misleading way
Incorporating	adding; including as a part
Peek	a quick look
Resume	start again after a pause

Language spotlight

1. See the light of day

- **Meaning**: To be released, made public or seen by other people for the first time.
- **Synonyms**: come out, be released, be published
- **Antonyms**: stay hidden, remain unseen, be kept secret
- **Examples**:
    - The singer recorded a whole album that never **saw the light of day**.
    - After ten years of work, her first novel finally **saw the light of day** last spring.

2. Skim over

- **Meaning**: To read or look at something quickly to get the main ideas, without reading every detail.
- **Synonyms**: glance through, scan, flick through
- **Antonyms**: pore over, study closely, read carefully
- **Examples**:
    - I only had time to **skim over** the report before the meeting started.
    - She **skimmed over** the menu and ordered the first pasta dish she saw.

3. Dumb down

- **Meaning**: To make something too simple, so that it loses some of its quality or depth.
- **Synonyms**: oversimplify, water down, simplify too much
- **Antonyms**: make more challenging, enrich, add depth to
- **Examples**:
    - Some people think that TV news has been **dumbed down** in recent years.
    - You don't need to **dumb down** your ideas to make them easy to follow.

4. From scratch

- **Meaning**: From the very beginning, without using anything that already exists.
- **Synonyms**: from the beginning, from nothing, from the ground up
- **Antonyms**: from a kit, from an existing version, using ready-made parts
- **Examples**:
    - We decided to build the garden shed **from scratch** instead of buying one.
    - After my computer crashed, I had to rewrite the whole essay **from scratch**.

5. Get back on track

- **Meaning**: To return to making good progress after a problem or delay.
- **Synonyms**: get going again, recover, regain momentum
- **Antonyms**: go off course, fall behind, lose your way
- **Examples**:
    - After a slow start to the season, the team finally **got back on track** with three wins in a row.
    - A short walk usually helps me **get back on track** when I'm stuck on a problem.

Quiz

Listening Comprehension Multiple Choice Questions

1. Who asked for this type of episode most recently?

a) A Spanish teacher called Marco

b) A Brazilian member called Itamar

c) An Italian listener called Sofia

d) A German student called Lukas

2. Why did Alastair never release his very first episodes?

a) His borrowed microphone broke

b) A friend said they were too hard

c) He thought the content was boring

d) He lost the files before publishing

3. Why are there not many episodes about art?

a) Art does not work well without images

b) Most listeners said they disliked art

c) Art topics are usually too controversial

d) Alastair knows very little about art

4. How does Alastair use AI tools in his work?

a) To write complete scripts in his voice

b) To record the audio for each episode

c) To create the vocabulary definitions

d) To give him feedback on his scripts

5. According to the survey, what is listeners' biggest challenge?

a) Understanding native speakers

b) Speaking fluently

c) Writing correctly

d) Remembering new words

True or False

6. Alastair recorded his first episodes with a microphone he borrowed from a friend. (True/False)

7. The episode on the Cambridge Five was planned as a three-part mini-series from the start. (True/False)

8. Alastair now writes out the entire script and reads it out loud. (True/False)

9. Alastair found several external scriptwriters whose work he was happy with. (True/False)

10. According to the survey, most listeners are under the age of 35. (True/False)

Fill in the Blanks

11. So, I scrapped them - they simply never saw the light of ___.

12. I just refer ____ to my notes, and the process is a whole lot simpler.

13. I try to write the script in one __, and this writing process typically takes anywhere from two to five hours.

14. I realised it would have been quicker for me to just write everything from _____.

15. They can be useful for giving me a fresh idea and helping me get back on _____.

Vocabulary Practice

16. What does "**seasoned**" mean in "a seasoned listener to this show"?

a) New, having only just started listening

b) Experienced, having listened for a long time

c) Critical, having complained many times

d) Occasional, listening only now and then

17. What does "**apolitical**" mean when Alastair describes how he tries to be in the show?

a) Strongly supporting one political party

b) Very interested in the latest political news

c) Not taking any side in politics

d) Willing to discuss only serious topics

18. What does "**rough**" mean in "a rough plan"?

a) Not detailed, giving only the main ideas

b) Hard and uneven when you touch it

c) Violent, aggressive and unpleasant

d) Very carefully worked out in detail

19. What does "**gravitate**" mean when Alastair talks about the algorithms on YouTube and Spotify?

a) Strongly push away from

b) Slowly fall down towards

c) Carefully check and judge

d) Be naturally pulled towards

20. In the podcast, what does "**resume**" mean?

a) Stop for a long time

b) Be summarised briefly

c) Start again after a pause

d) Change completely

Answers

1. b) A Brazilian member called Itamar
2. c) He thought the content was boring
3. a) Art does not work well without images
4. d) To give him feedback on his scripts
5. b) Speaking fluently
6. True
7. False
8. True
9. False
10. False
11. day
12. back
13. go
14. scratch
15. track
16. b) Experienced, having listened for a long time
17. c) Not taking any side in politics
18. a) Not detailed, giving only the main ideas

19. d) Be naturally pulled towards

20. c) Start again after a pause