TRANSCRIPT · EPISODE 194

Understand English but Struggle to Speak? Learn from Juan’s Story

English learning resource · EN

Full episode script · English

306 lines

Study task: Listen again and notice the expressions you studied.

For four episodes, we have been talking about a man.

A man from Barcelona, who arrived in Wolverhampton with one suitcase and a sentence he practised in the shower.

We told you about his bus stop.

His fourteen questions.

His three days in bed.

We told you about the night he made room for somebody in a circle at a party.

And all this time, he has been listening.

Hello.

It is very strange to hear my own life described by two people on a podcast.

Welcome to Your English Toolbox, the podcast that trains your English while you live your real life.

I am Martin.

And I am Julia.

And I am Juan.

This is the fifth and last conversation in our series about small talk in English.

No list of rules today.

Just one honest conversation.

So, tell our friends who you are.

I am twenty-three.

I am from Barcelona, from a neighbourhood called Sants.

I came to Wolverhampton fourteen months ago to study a business course.

And I work in a café near the station, Saturdays, Sundays and two evenings.

And before you came, what did you think the hard part would be?

Speaking.

I thought the hard part would be speaking.

And was it?

No.

The hard part was being in the room.

Explain that, because I think that is the whole episode.

In my first month, I understood almost everything.

In the lectures, in the shops, on the bus.

My English was good.

I understood everything, and I was in nothing.

Say that again, slowly.

I understood everything.

And I was in nothing.

That is the difference between understanding and taking part.

Yes.

They are not the same skill.

Nobody told me that.

And listeners, here is a natural way to express the idea he means.

To be part of the conversation.

It does not mean your body is there.

It means you are part of what is happening.

Now, we told our friends that in your first weeks you said about forty words in a whole day.

That is true.

I counted them on a Tuesday.

Why on a Tuesday?

Because on Monday I did not want to know.

And the sentence in the shower?

Ah.

There was a girl working in the library café.

And I prepared a sentence for her.

A perfect sentence, with a joke inside it.

How long did you carry it?

Eleven days.

And then I never said it.

Never?

Never.

I think it is still in my head somewhere, waiting.

I want to ask you about the hardest moment.

And I do not mean the most difficult English.

I mean the worst moment.

February.

I was ill for three days.

Not dangerous, just properly ill.

And everybody in my building had gone home for the week.

And you told nobody.

I told nobody.

I had forty people in my phone and I told nobody.

Why not?

Because I did not want to be a problem.

And at that time, what did you tell yourself the reason was?

My English.

I told myself, when my English is better, I will have people.

It was a very comfortable explanation.

Why comfortable?

Because it was not my fault, and because it had a solution that was only studying.

And studying is easy for me.

Studying is the easy part.

Studying is the easy part.

Now I want to ask about something very practical, and nobody talks about it.

Go on.

Being tired.

Oh.

Yes.

At six o'clock in the evening my English is good.

At ten o'clock my English is tired.

What does tired English feel like?

The words are there, but they are further away.

I have to walk to get them.

That is a beautiful way to describe it.

It is not beautiful at eleven at night in a kitchen.

And what did you learn to do about it?

I stopped having important conversations after ten.

And I stopped thinking that my tired English was my real English.

Let us go to the things that worked.

And I want the small ones, not the big ones.

The bus stop.

Tell them.

It was raining, in October, on the Penn Road.

There was an older woman under the same shelter.

And I said two words.

This rain.

No verb.

No verb.

Fourteen years of English grammar, and my first real conversation had no verb in it.

And what did she say?

She said it had not stopped since Monday.

And then she told me her sister lives near Alicante.

Forty seconds.

Forty seconds.

And my hands were shaking on the bus.

Second thing that worked.

Priya.

Your classmate.

She asked me how my week had been.

And I opened my mouth to say fine.

And you did not.

I said, honestly, it was bad.

I was ill and I did not tell anyone.

And she went up the staircase with you.

She told me she had done the same thing in her first year.

And now she sends me a message when she is going to the library.

That is all.

That is the friendship.

It does not sound like much.

It is everything.

Third thing.

And this is the one I most want our friends to hear.

Asking people to repeat.

Which was hard for you.

It was the hardest.

Because when you ask somebody to repeat, you are saying, out loud, I did not understand you.

And I was ashamed of that.

And now?

Now I think I was ashamed of the wrong thing.

Nodding is worse.

Nodding when I have not understood can mislead the other person.

It can feel like a tiny lie you tell with your head.

That line is going in the description of this episode.

And it is how you got the job.

Yes.

In the interview, the coffee machine was very loud.

And the manager asked me something about my availability, and I did not catch the end.

And you said?

Sorry, I did not catch the last bit.

And she told me, weeks later, that this was the reason she gave me the job.

Did she explain why?

She said half the people she interviews nod when they have not understood her.

And in a café, that is somebody giving oat milk to a man who ordered tea for eleven months.

There is one more thing that worked, and you have never told me about it directly.

The party.

The welcome party for my course.

I was very proud of myself that night, because I did everything correctly.

What do you mean, correctly?

I asked a girl to repeat something twice.

I blamed a speaker that was too loud.

I joined a group by asking about a film.

I left a conversation in three parts, like a man following a recipe.

And which of those do you remember now?

None of them.

Then what do you remember?

There was a man standing just outside our circle.

Holding a drink, waiting for a gap.

And I knew exactly what that was, because it had been me for five months.

What did you do?

I asked him his name.

And then I turned to the group and I said, have you met Andrei?

You had known him for four seconds.

Four seconds.

I introduced a complete stranger to four other strangers, with total confidence.

And that is the Andrei who is bad at football.

That is the Andrei who is bad at football.

Now I want the other side.

What did not work?

Three things, and I am a little embarrassed about all of them.

Go on.

The first one is the apps.

I did my lessons every day for seven months.

I had a very long streak.

And?

And a streak is not a conversation.

It was a way of feeling that I was doing something, in my room, alone.

And the second thing?

The Spanish group.

In my first month I found four Spanish students, and we spoke Spanish, and it was wonderful.

And you are going to say that was a mistake.

No.

I am not going to say that.

They saved me in the first weeks.

But I stayed there for five months, and it was comfortable.

Comfort can keep you in the same place for a long time.

So it was a good shelter and a bad house.

Yes.

That is exactly it.

And the third thing?

Waiting.

I was waiting to be ready.

I thought there would be a day when my English was ready, and then I would start.

And the day came?

The day never came.

The day does not exist.

And what about the advice people gave you?

Because everybody gives advice to somebody who has just moved.

Everybody.

And all of it was true and none of it was useful.

Give us the worst one.

Just talk to people.

Thank you.

Which people, and what do I say?

That is not advice, that is the problem described back to you.

Yes.

And the second one was, watch television in English.

And that one is not bad.

It is not bad, but it is not the thing.

Television gave me words.

It did not give me a Tuesday with somebody in it.

Can I ask you about the café?

Please.

What did you learn there that you did not learn in a classroom?

Everything useful.

In class I learned the word furthermore.

I have never heard a human being say furthermore.

And at work?

At work I learned sorted, cheers, no worries, and are you alright.

Ah.

Tell them about are you alright, because this one confused you.

On my second day, a man came in and said, are you alright?

And I thought something was wrong with my face.

So I said, yes, I am fine, thank you, why?

And he was just saying hello.

He was just saying hello.

In a quick, casual exchange, you alright can be a greeting.

People often answer, yeah, all right, thanks, you?

But sometimes they really are asking how you feel.

And nobody warns you.

And the correct answer?

Alright, you?

That is all.

Two words, and you are a local.

Juan, I want to ask about your parents.

And you can tell me not to.

No, it is fine.

I call them on Sundays at seven.

Every Sunday since I arrived.

And your mother asks you something every week.

She asks me if I have made friends.

And what did you say, that first year?

I said yes.

Every Sunday, for about seven months, I said yes.

And when did that change?

In June.

I called her and I said, Mum, I have a friend.

His name is Andrei, he is from Romania, and he is extremely bad at football.

And what did she say?

She cried.

And then I cried, which was not the plan.

And then we argued about the wifi in my flat for ten minutes, and everything was normal again.

That is the most honest ending to a story I have heard on this show.

That is my family.

One more thing before we let you go.

Something happened three weeks ago.

Ah, yes.

I dreamed in English.

For the first time?

For the first time.

A completely boring dream, in a supermarket.

But it was in English.

And how did it feel?

Wonderful.

Except for one thing.

What?

In the dream, I still had an accent.

Last question, and it is the one our friends are waiting for.

If you could speak to the Juan who got off the plane fourteen months ago, what would you tell him?

Three things, and they are all very short.

Go on.

The first one.

Most people are thinking about what they will say next.

They are not checking your grammar.

The second?

You do not have to wait until your English is perfect to join in.

Start where you are.

And the third?

The imperfect conversation is not practice for the real conversation.

The imperfect conversation is the real conversation.

And that is the end of the series.

Five conversations about small talk.

How to start one.

What to say after hello.

The question that changes everything.

And what to say when you have not understood a word.

And one man from Barcelona who did all of it badly, in the rain, with no verbs.

Thank you very much.

Juan, thank you for coming.

Thank you for telling my story for four weeks without asking me.

Everything from this whole series, the transcripts, the vocabulary, and every sentence from all five episodes, is waiting for you at yourenglishtoolbox.com.

With translations, flashcards and downloadable PDFs, completely free.

Thank you for spending this time with us.

And whoever you have been meaning to speak to.

Go and say two words.

They do not need a verb.

Juan, where are you going now?

To work.

Terrible weather, isn't it?

See you in the next one.