TRANSCRIPT · EPISODE 237

AI Agents for Everyday Life: Your Personal English Practice Partner

English learning resource · EN

Full episode script · English

201 lines

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

It is Sunday evening, and you have promised yourself that this week you will practise your English.

But tomorrow is busy, you are not sure where to start, and you do not want to make mistakes in front of anyone.

What if you had a patient practice partner ready for the ten minutes you actually have?

You can begin with a normal AI chat, and some tools let you create a helper that follows your own learning instructions.

Today, we will build one together and see what it can really do.

Welcome to Your English Toolbox.

I am Martin, and Julia and Theo are here with me.

Hello, everyone.

Last time, we talked about AI and jobs.

Today, we are bringing the conversation closer to home.

We keep hearing about AI agents, but many of us have only ever used a chatbot.

So we will start there, with a simple example, and then create a helper for your English.

We will also look at a few everyday tasks and what you need to check before trusting the result.

And by the end, you will have a short set of instructions you can try yourself.

Theo, I know what a chat is.

I type a question, and the AI gives me an answer.

Exactly, for example, you might ask it to explain a word you heard in a film.

And then I have to tell it what I need again the next time.

That depends on the app and its settings, but a normal chat often begins with you explaining the task.

So what is an agent?

Think of a helper given a goal and instructions for how to work towards it.

Depending on the tool, it may also use other tools or take several steps to help complete that goal.

Can you make that less mysterious?

Imagine asking for ideas for dinner using the vegetables you already have.

A chat can suggest a recipe when you ask.

And what might an agent add?

A more capable assistant might also search for recipes and organise the ingredients into a list, if it has those tools.

So it can do more than give one answer, but only within the access and features it has been given.

Yes, and different products use the word agent in different ways.

Does it have to act on my behalf to be useful?

No, a personalised helper can be useful even if it only talks with you and cannot operate other apps.

That distinction matters for our English practice.

It does, because a saved set of tutoring instructions is not automatically an independent agent that can use your apps.

So I do not need to worry about a robot booking my holidays while I learn a new verb.

Not unless you give something that ability, Martin.

And even then, what it can do depends on the service and the permissions you allow.

What could I use one for outside work?

I always come home with ingredients and no idea what to cook.

Try asking for three simple dinner ideas using what you already have.

Add how much time you have and any foods you need to avoid.

Then ask it to turn the recipe I choose into a shopping list.

That would help me decide without handing over the decision.

And if you have an allergy, check every ingredient and label yourself rather than relying on a generated recipe.

What about planning a weekend away?

You could ask it to suggest a simple plan within your budget and with time for breaks.

I would ask for a few options, not a timetable that leaves no room for getting lost.

Getting lost is part of your travel plan, Julia.

Only the interesting kind.

If the tool can search the web, ask for links and check current prices and opening times with the provider.

A suggestion is not a reservation, and the ability to book depends on the particular tool.

So far, I could do both examples in an ordinary chat.

Absolutely, and that is a good place to start.

When does creating a personal helper become useful?

When you want the same kind of help again and again without rewriting all your preferences each time.

Then let us make one for someone learning English.

Let us call her Ana.

Ana understands a lot, but when she needs to speak, she worries that she will choose the wrong words.

She wants to practise, but she has ten minutes between work and dinner.

That is enough time for a small, useful practice session.

She does not need another long list of words that she will never use.

She can ask for practice based on a situation she actually expects to meet.

For example, she needs to speak to a neighbour about a noisy repair.

And she wants to sound polite without sounding angry.

That is already a clear goal for a practice partner.

Where does she begin?

First, she can try the idea in a normal chat and see whether it helps.

Some services also let her save instructions in a custom assistant, so she can return to them later.

Does she need to know how to code?

Not for every tool, because some let you describe the helper you want in ordinary language.

For example, Microsoft describes a builder for custom agents in its work and school Copilot experience.

What would Ana do if she had access to it?

In that experience, an eligible user can open Agents, choose New Agent, and describe the helper they want.

Then she can follow the setup, test the helper, and save it.

Access depends on the account and licence, and the screens may change.

So if Ana cannot find that feature, she can still use the instructions in an ordinary chat.

Exactly, she can try the exercise in a free chat service if one is available to her.

All right, let us help Ana write those instructions.

Start by saying what kind of helper you want.

“You are my patient English practice partner.”

Then tell it about your level and your goal.

“My English is around B1, and I want to feel more comfortable in everyday conversations.”

If you are not sure of your level, say what you can do and what feels difficult.

Ana understands simple conversations but needs more time to find her own words.

Good, and next she can describe how the practice should work.

“Ask me one short question at a time, and wait for my answer.”

That part is important, because I do not want ten questions arriving at once.

She can also say how she wants feedback.

“Let me try first, then correct the most useful mistake and explain it simply.”

Why only one mistake?

It is a starting preference, so a learner is not overwhelmed by a page of corrections.

She can ask for more detail whenever she wants it.

And how does she stop it from giving the answer too soon?

She can add, “Give me a hint before you show me the answer.”

We also want material that fits the time available.

“Keep each practice session short enough for ten minutes.”

Those instructions can be saved where the service supports it, or copied into a new chat when needed.

It sounds like writing a small note to a teacher about what helps you learn.

And it is fine to change the note if the first attempt does not work.

Let us try Ana's neighbour situation.

The helper asks, “How would you politely ask your neighbour when the repairs will finish?”

Ana pauses, because she is not sure how to begin.

She could ask for a hint instead of a complete answer.

The hint might be, “Start with a friendly greeting, then ask if they know when the work will end.”

Now she tries, “Hello, do you know when the work will finish?”

That is clear and polite.

Could she make it a little softer?

She could try, “Hi, do you happen to know when the work will finish?”

What does “do you happen to know” add?

It makes the question sound a little less direct.

And the helper could give Ana another situation to practise the same phrase, rather than simply asking her to memorise it.

For example, “Do you happen to know when the shop closes?”

Now Ana has a phrase she can use beyond that one conversation.

What if Ana wants to practise translating from her own language?

She can ask the helper to give her a short sentence in the language she chooses.

Then she translates it into English before seeing a suggested answer.

I like that, because the difficult part is finding the words myself.

Let us imagine the meaning is that Ana started living here three years ago and still lives here now.

She tries, “I live here since three years.”

A natural correction would be, “I have lived here for three years.”

And the useful explanation is that the situation started in the past and continues now.

Could the helper give another correct answer?

Yes, “I have been living here for three years” is also possible.

That matters, because language is not always a puzzle with one single answer.

Ana can ask, “Is my version understandable, and is there a more natural way to say it?”

And if the explanation is confusing?

Ask for a simpler example, or check the point with a reliable dictionary or teacher.

What else could Ana make with her helper?

She could ask for a short dialogue between neighbours, followed by three questions about its meaning.

Or a few practice sentences using expressions she has already met in an episode of this podcast.

She could say, “Make them suitable for my level and use situations from daily life.”

And she might add, “Do not show the answers until I have tried.”

What if the exercise is too easy?

Tell the helper what was easy and ask for one small step up in difficulty.

And if every sentence is full of words she has never seen?

She can ask for shorter sentences and explanations of the useful new words.

For people with access through education, Microsoft's Study and Learn tool describes activities such as quizzes and questions based on uploaded materials.

That particular tool requires an eligible education account, and other services offer different features.

So the goal is not to find one perfect product.

It is to make the practice fit the person and the time they have.

I have one worry, Theo.

What if the helper confidently corrects something that was already right?

It can make mistakes, and it can also prefer one natural expression when another is equally good.

That might leave a learner feeling they have failed when they have not.

Exactly, so ask why it made a correction and compare important points with a reliable source.

And can it tell me whether my pronunciation sounds right?

Some tools support voice, but feedback features vary, and a written chat cannot hear you speak.

Even with voice, I would check whether the feedback is actually useful rather than assume it is always accurate.

Should Ana upload every personal document she has, so it knows everything about her?

Please do not make that your first experiment, Martin.

Start with the level, goals and examples you are comfortable sharing, and check the privacy settings and terms of the service.

If you use someone else's material, make sure you have the right to share it.

And if I use a tool connected to my other apps?

Check what it can access or change before giving permission.

A useful practice partner should give you more confidence and choices, not take them away.

I started this conversation thinking an AI agent sounded like something for experts.

Now I am thinking about small problems that take up space in my head.

That is a good place to look for ideas, as long as you choose what you want help with.

I could ask a helper to turn a long list of things I need to do into a simple plan for the week.

And ask it to leave room for the unexpected, because my weeks never go exactly to plan.

Yes, and if it cannot see your calendar, you can tell it only the times you want to share.

What if I receive a difficult letter and do not understand what it is asking?

You could ask a chat to explain the wording in plain language and suggest questions to ask the sender.

Without putting in my address, account numbers, or other private details if they are not needed.

And for an important decision, check the original message and ask the right person or a qualified adviser.

I could also use it to plan meals for the week around my budget and the time I have.

Or compare a few things I might need for a trip, then check the prices before I decide.

Those are good examples, and live information requires a tool that can access it.

It seems useful for someone caring for a family member, too.

They might want help turning a list of questions into a clear note for an appointment.

Yes, the person can decide what to ask and share only information they are comfortable sharing.

The helper can organise the questions, but it does not know my family the way I do.

And it does not replace the professional who can answer them.

The same principle applies to learning a language.

The tool can prepare the practice, but you decide what matters in your life and make the words your own.

Let us return to that busy Sunday evening.

Ana has not found an extra hour in her day.

She still has work tomorrow, dinner to prepare, and a conversation she feels nervous about.

But now she has a way to use ten minutes to practise that conversation.

She asks for one question at a time and a hint before the answer.

She tries the words herself, and the helper explains one useful correction.

If the exercise does not fit, she can ask for a change, or choose a different tool.

And if an answer sounds wrong, she can ask why and check it with a reliable source.

Perhaps tomorrow she will still feel nervous when she speaks to her neighbour.

That is all right, because confidence does not have to arrive before you begin.

It can grow when you try a sentence, notice that you were understood, and try another one.

The important thing is not having the perfect assistant.

It is finding one small way to practise that fits your real life.

Today, we have imagined an assistant that helps you prepare for a conversation.

But what happens when agents begin to take on more of the tasks that fill a working day?

They could change how teams organise work, what people are expected to do, and which skills become valuable.

Could an agent take care of the routine parts of my job?

And if it does, will I have more time to do meaningful work, or will my role change completely?

Those are the questions we will explore next time, with practical examples and no simple promises.

For now, choose one small thing you would like help with this week.

Perhaps it is planning dinner, understanding a letter, or finding the words for a conversation.

Start there, make the instructions your own, and see what works for you.

You do not need to have all the answers before you begin.

Sometimes, a better question is the first step.

And in our next conversation, we will ask what happens when those questions begin to change the way we work.

Thank you for listening to Your English Toolbox.

We look forward to seeing you next time.