

Podcast transcript : Why You're Not Improving Your English (The Truth Hurts, But It Can Help)

Many English learners spend years listening to podcasts, watching videos, reading articles, and following language-learning accounts on social media. Yet despite all this effort, they often feel stuck at the same level.

If this sounds familiar, the problem may not be your motivation, intelligence, or talent. The issue is often *how* you are learning.

The reality is that many learners spend most of their time consuming English rather than actively using it. Understanding English feels productive, but understanding and improving are not always the same thing.

This article explores the psychological and cognitive reasons why progress slows down and what you can do to move beyond the intermediate plateau.

The Illusion of Progress

One of the biggest traps in language learning is the **illusion of competence**.

Many learners listen to a podcast, watch a video, or read an article and feel satisfied because they understand most of it. This feeling is rewarding. Your brain recognizes familiar words and phrases, and that recognition creates a sense of achievement.

However, recognition is not the same as production.

You may recognize advanced vocabulary when you hear it, but can you use it naturally in a conversation, presentation, or meeting?

Understanding a word and retrieving it when you need it are two very different skills.

When you consume English passively, you strengthen recognition pathways in your brain. When you actively speak, write, or explain ideas, you strengthen retrieval pathways. Retrieval is the skill that allows you to access vocabulary under pressure and use it effectively in real situations.

Without regular retrieval practice, learners often fall back on the same simple vocabulary and sentence structures they have been using for years.

Why Comfort Is Holding You Back

Learning that feels easy is often less effective than learning that feels challenging.

Psychologists use the term **desirable difficulties** to describe activities that require effort but lead to stronger learning and longer-lasting memories.

Many learners prefer what could be called "comfortable learning":

- Watching videos without taking notes
- Listening to podcasts while doing other tasks
- Reading without reviewing vocabulary
- Organizing study materials without actually practicing

These activities feel productive because they are enjoyable and low-stress. Unfortunately, they often produce limited long-term results.

Real progress usually feels uncomfortable.

Think about physical exercise. Muscles grow when they are challenged beyond their comfort zone. The brain works in a similar way. When studying English requires concentration, effort, and occasional frustration, stronger learning is often taking place.

If every study session feels easy, it may be time to increase the level of challenge.

The Intermediate Plateau

Progress is easy to see when you are a beginner.

Learning your first 100 words or your first basic grammar structures creates noticeable improvement. Every week brings something new.

At the intermediate level, however, progress becomes slower and less visible.

Moving from intermediate to advanced requires mastering thousands of vocabulary items, subtle grammar patterns, natural pronunciation, and sophisticated communication skills. The improvements are real, but they are smaller and harder to notice.

Because progress becomes less obvious, many learners stop challenging themselves. They continue using the same study methods that helped them as beginners, even though those methods are no longer enough.

The result is a plateau.

Breaking through that plateau requires focused effort rather than simply spending more time with English.

The Hidden Cost of Perfectionism

Many learners avoid speaking because they are afraid of making mistakes.

They often describe themselves as perfectionists, but perfectionism can become a barrier to learning.

When speaking a second language, adults often feel vulnerable. In their native language, they are intelligent, articulate, and confident. In English, they may feel less capable and less expressive.

This discomfort is completely normal.

However, mistakes are not evidence of failure. They are information.

The brain learns through feedback. It makes predictions, receives corrections, and gradually adjusts its internal model of the language.

Without mistakes, there is no feedback.

Without feedback, there is little improvement.

Learners who wait until they can speak perfectly often spend years avoiding the very practice that would help them improve.

Why You Forget So Much

Another common frustration is forgetting vocabulary and grammar shortly after learning them.

This is not a personal weakness. It is simply how human memory works.

Research on memory shows that people forget information surprisingly quickly if they do not review or use it. A large percentage of new information can disappear within days.

The brain constantly decides which information is worth keeping. If a new word is seen once and never used again, the brain assumes it is unimportant and eventually removes it from active memory.

This is why many learners study vocabulary lists repeatedly but still struggle to remember the words later.

The Power of Spaced Repetition

One of the most effective ways to fight forgetting is **spaced repetition**.

Instead of reviewing information once, you review it at carefully timed intervals:

- After one day
- After three days
- After one week
- After two weeks
- After one month

Each review strengthens the memory before it disappears completely.

Successful language learners often use flashcard systems that require active recall. Rather than choosing the correct answer from a list, they must produce the word from memory.

This small difference is extremely important.

Recognition is easy. Retrieval builds lasting memory.

Are Language Apps Enough?

Language-learning apps can be useful, especially for maintaining motivation and creating daily habits.

However, many apps focus heavily on recognition activities:

- Matching words with pictures
- Selecting multiple-choice answers
- Completing simple exercises

These activities are helpful, but they do not fully prepare learners for real communication.

Real-life conversations do not provide multiple-choice options. You must generate language independently and often under pressure.

Apps can support your learning, but they should not be your only learning method.

To develop speaking ability, you must spend time producing language yourself.

The Missing Ingredient: Deliberate Practice

Many learners spend years practicing English without improving significantly because they are not engaging in **deliberate practice**.

Deliberate practice focuses on specific weaknesses rather than general exposure.

For example:

1. Isolate Weaknesses

Do not spend all your time practicing skills you already have.

If conditional sentences cause problems, focus on conditional sentences.

If pronunciation is your weakness, spend dedicated time improving pronunciation.

Growth happens when you work on areas that challenge you.

2. Get Immediate Feedback

Feedback helps you identify mistakes before they become habits.

Feedback can come from:

- Teachers
- Language partners
- AI tools
- Grammar-checking software

The important thing is knowing exactly what needs improvement.

3. Practice with Full Concentration

Deep learning requires focused attention.

Thirty minutes of concentrated practice is often more valuable than several hours of distracted exposure.

A Powerful Exercise Most Learners Avoid

One of the most effective activities for improving listening and speaking combines **transcription** and **shadowing**.

Step 1: Transcribe

Choose a short audio clip, around two minutes long.

Listen carefully and write down everything you hear, including small words such as articles and prepositions.

Then compare your transcription with the original text.

This exercise reveals listening gaps that often go unnoticed.

Step 2: Shadow

Play the audio again and speak at exactly the same time as the speaker.

Copy:

- Pronunciation
- Rhythm
- Intonation
- Connected speech

Repeat the process multiple times until it feels natural.

Language is not only a mental skill. It is also a physical skill involving the muscles of the mouth, tongue, and throat. Shadowing helps train those physical movements.

Why Reading Alone Won't Build Your Vocabulary

Many learners read extensively but feel their vocabulary remains limited.

The reason is often simple: they encounter new words but do very little with them.

Seeing a word once is rarely enough.

When you discover an important new word:

1. Look up its definition.
2. Learn common collocations.
3. Examine example sentences.
4. Create your own sentences.
5. Connect the word to your personal or professional life.

For example, if you learn the word **ubiquitous**, don't stop at understanding its meaning. Use it in sentences that relate to your own experiences and interests.

Personal connections make words easier to remember because the brain stores information through associations.

The Path Forward

If your English has stopped improving, take an honest look at how you spend your study time.

Listening to podcasts, watching videos, and reading articles are valuable activities. However, they should not be the majority of your learning.

A useful goal is to spend more time on production than consumption.

That means:

- Speaking regularly
- Writing regularly
- Recording yourself
- Reviewing vocabulary systematically
- Practicing retrieval
- Focusing on weaknesses
- Seeking feedback

The uncomfortable truth is that advanced English is built through effortful practice, not passive exposure alone.

The good news is that if you feel stuck, it does not mean you lack ability. It often means you need a different approach.

Small amounts of deliberate practice every day will usually produce better results than occasional bursts of intensive study.

Progress comes from consistency, challenge, and active use of the language. The next time you learn a new word, don't just recognize it. Use it. Write with it. Speak with it. Make it part of your life.

That is how real improvement begins.

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