

Episode 125: Language Tips and Tricks

Summary

In the last episode of English in 10 Minutes, Nick and Wendy give their top tips for language learning, including how to enjoy the process, how to practice speaking, and which apps to use.

Transcript

Nick: Hello and welcome to our 125th and final episode - at least for now, you never know what the future will bring. I'm here with Wendy and we're talking about language tips and tricks. And, Wendy, you've been learning languages for most of your life, so you must have a tip or two to share.

Wendy: I guess I do, yeah. I started learning languages when I was a teenager. When I was in high school, I studied Spanish for three years and then continued on at university. Umm, and discovered that I really loved it. Prior to¹ that, I hadn't had much exposure to foreign languages or to anything foreign, really. Growing up in Alabama, it wasn't a very multicultural place. But I really loved learning languages and learning about other places and other cultures through the language. The one thing that I did discover was that book learning is not enough. You really have to actually practice speaking the language, because when I was in high school, even though my teacher was a native speaker - she was from Puerto Rico - she never spoke to us in Spanish. And we, the chil-, the students, never spoke in Spanish either. The whole class was conducted in English. So I learned a fair bit of Spanish, I learned how to read Spanish and write Spanish, because I was a good student and I was enjoying it. So I learned book Spanish, but I ... when I went to Mexico for the first time, I discovered that I couldn't speak at all. The words just wouldn't come out. So you really have to practice speaking. That would be probably my top tip.

Nick: Yeah, definitely. And I think probably one thing that you've seen, uhh, through the course of your language learning is that there's so many more options, so many more possibilities, for learning languages now, both in terms of the ability to access content in your target language and also in tools and apps that are now available, and so we'll try to get to all of this.

Wendy: Absolutely, yeah. No, the tools available now are amazing. It's so much easier than it was when I was growing up.

¹ prior to: before

Nick: Yeah, so basically, traditionally your options are to join a class, or to get some kind of teach yourself book with an audio set and do that. And now there's just an incredible number of options. And so the thing that I've preached², you know, to my students when I was teaching, and really the reason that we started this podcast, was to get people to interact with the language by consuming native (speaker) material, or real material, and there's so just so much that you can do with that. And so what I say to people is that, you know, you need to get to a point where you're enjoying language learning for the sake of it³, where you're enjoying the process, rather than it being a kind of study-type thing that you kind of don't really want to do but you feel that you have to do. Umm, and so what I say to people is, 'Just do what you like doing in your own language in your target language.' So if you like listening to music, great, listen to music in your target language. If you like, uhh, watching TV or movies, then do that, maybe with the help of subtitles. If you like reading, which is something that I like doing a lot, then do that in your target language. And not everything works for every person. So I think there's a couple of examples there. So for example, music is something that you've used a lot, because you're really good at lyrics⁴, learning lyrics and remembering lyrics in English, and then that transfers over to your other languages as well.

Wendy: Yeah, I ... sometimes I'll be reminded of a song that I used to know 20 years ago and I had completely forgotten about that song, but then once I hear a little bit of it, I can start singing it and still know all of the words. So, yeah, uhh, lyrics do stick with me and I found that that was a great way for me to learn languages, was by listening to music in other languages. But for you, that doesn't work as well.

Nick: No, because I'm hopeless with lyrics, uhh, even in English, and so when I'm listening in a foreign language, that's even worse, and I just, uhh, no, they just don't stick with me at all. Umm, but I like reading, and I've found that that's been a really huge help with foreign languages. So for example, right now I'm reading a book in Portuguese. And it's a novel⁵ but it's about the Portuguese discovery of Brazil, and since I've been doing a lot of research about this period and era anyway, you know, it's right up my alley⁶ in terms of the plot⁷ of the novel. And so I'm enjoying reading it for the sake of the content. It's not something that I think about in terms of, 'Oh, I have to study this foreign language now.' I'm just like, 'Oh, I want to see what happens next in this book, so I'll just read it.' Uhh, and it

² preached: advocated for, talked to people about with the idea of convincing them (often about religion but not in this case)

³ for the sake of it: for no other reason

⁴ lyrics: words in songs

⁵ novel: fiction book

⁶ right up my alley: perfect for me (the opposite of: it's not my cup of tea)

⁷ plot: the storyline of a particular fictional book, movie or TV show

happens that it's in Portuguese. So basically, the point is that the goal, essentially, is just to read the book and enjoy it. And then it's almost an unintended consequence of that, that you improve in the language as well, because you're reading it in a foreign language.

Wendy: Yeah, no, I think that's great advice, is to seek out⁸ content that you enjoy. So, yeah, and also the medium that you enjoy. So you enjoy reading more than listening to music. So you're reading and you're also reading the types of books that you would like to read in English anyway. So, for example, if someone likes cooking, then maybe they would go look for a YouTube cooking channel in the language that they're learning. Umm, yeah, I think that's ... it's important to find content that you're going to be interested in.

Nick: Yeah, definitely. Umm, so you mentioned before that speaking is really important. And that's also easier than it's ever been, even if you're not in the country where the language is spoken. There's a lot of, umm, you know, websites and platforms online where you can arrange speaking with people. So, [italki](#) is one, that used to be a sponsor of ours. Uhh, [conversationexchange.com](#) is another. And these are sites where you just create a profile, you say what your native language is and what the language or the languages are that you're learning, and then you can maybe arrange a time to have a Skype conversation, uhh, with someone else. And that's really beneficial, I remember doing that a lot with, uhh, Italian which I really enjoyed doing a few years ago. Umm, (I'm) probably not as good at setting it up and arranging it as I should be, but once you get into it, then you want to do it more and more. So it's one of those things where if you just start doing it, if you get over that fear initially, umm, then that's great. And if you find someone that's at the same level as you are, in your language, as you are in their language, then you don't have to be scared or nervous about speaking, because you know that, you know, they have those same fears when they're speaking your language too. Umm, and so, you know, it's just an environment where you can be, yeah, you can just be comfortable, uhh, and not be nervous and just do your best.

Wendy: Yeah. And in some cases you may be able to find someone living in your same town or city and you might be able to do, you know, a live in-person exchange too, which is also a lot of fun and can, you know, lead to friendships and other things. Umm...

Nick: Right, so [meetup.com](#) might be one way to do that. Are there others that you know about?

Wendy: Umm, I know at my university, they arranged that for, you know, foreign exchange students to exchange their native language with the American students who were also studying at the university. So if you have a university in your town, uhh, that might be something, umm, you know, even if you're not a student there, they might be open to, you know, if you have a language that someone else wants to practice with you, then they might be open to that.

⁸ seek out: search for, look for

Nick: Or Facebook groups as well.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: There's often, uhh, if you're in a major city, there's often groups, umm, that have weekly meet-ups or something like that as well. We have one that we go to sometimes, uhh, here in Lisbon with Portuguese, although we haven't been going to it since we got back from South America. But maybe we should get back into it. And they meet once a week and they speak for one hour in English and one hour in Portuguese. Umm, so there are also a huge number of apps that you can get for language now, and you're a little bit of an expert on this because [you wrote an article recently about it](#). So you've been doing your research on these different apps and trying them all out, so what can you tell us about those?

Wendy: Yeah, well, the most popular one is [Duolingo](#), so I'm guessing that a lot of our readers (listeners) have probably tried Duolingo before. It's very popular, because it's free, which is great that it's accessible for people in that way. Umm, and I did find that it was very motivating because they use lots of gamification techniques where it feels like a game rather than learning. So it got me hooked⁹ on it in that way. But I personally found that the methods weren't that effective for me. So I checked out some other apps that I liked better. One that I'm enjoying is called [LingoDeer](#), uhh, D-E-E-R like the animal deer. Uhh, they don't have that many languages, so if your language is not one of the ones that they teach, then obviously that won't work for you. But they are adding new ones all the time, and they're especially good for Asian languages, but I believe you can study English with them as well. Umm, [Drops](#) is another one that's a lot of fun. That's more vocabulary based, it's really just about individual vocabulary words, and not necessarily learning the grammar and the structure. But, uhh, it has a game-type feel to it as well. And Mango, [Mango Languages](#), is another one that I've been enjoying.

Nick: Wow, so you've really, uhh, got your feet in all these different apps.

Wendy: Yeah, I do. I have different ones that I use for different languages, like LingoDeer I use for Japanese and Chinese. And Drops, uhh, I've been using for Russian. And Mango, I've tried out a few different languages with that one. So, umm, I'm really having fun with the language apps.

Nick: Cool. I mean I think, overall, the best advice you can give anybody is: find whatever it is that works for you, try out different things, do things that you enjoy, spend time with the language, and, umm, you know, eventually, you'll see the progress.

Wendy: Yeah, definitely.

⁹ hooked: addicted

Nick: Alright, so good luck to all our listeners on their English journey. We hope that this podcast has been useful for you and, uhh, that you've enjoyed it.

Wendy: Yeah, hope so. And maybe see you again, feel free to get in touch¹⁰ if you have any questions. We're still around and, uhh, thanks so much for joining us.

Nick: OK, bye!

Wendy: Bye!

¹⁰ get in touch (+with me/us/you etc): contact, call/text/email

Comprehension Questions

1. What was the problem with Wendy's Spanish learning in high school?
2. What form of real content do Nick and Wendy like using for language learning, respectively?
3. What are the two things that Wendy likes about Duolingo?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. I thought the movie was just OK. The acting was good, but the _____ was boring.
2. He had never drunk energy drinks before, but he had a red bull one day and instantly became _____. Now he drinks one every day.
3. This song has a nice rhythm but the _____ don't make much sense, so it's not one of my favourites.
4. He _____ to everyone he knew about the benefits of his new diet, but most people weren't interested.
5. I love music, so when a friend invited me to a concert, I said yes immediately and told her it was _____.
6. She hadn't considered having children _____ her sister giving birth, but now that she's seen her niece, she wants a baby of her own.
7. When you move to a new country, you often have to _____ social opportunities rather than hoping that they will just materialise in front of you.
8. I haven't seen her in ages but I've heard that she got engaged. I'll have to _____ with her to congratulate her.
9. The Indian author Arundhati Roy finally wrote her second _____ nearly 20 years after publishing her first one.
10. On weekends he likes going for a drive just _____, without any particular destination in mind.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. What type of real material do you like consuming in your target language - music, TV/movies, books, podcasts, or something else? Why?
2. Have you participated in a language exchange, either in person or online? If so, how did it go? If not, why not?
3. Have you tried any language learning apps like Duolingo or the other ones Wendy mentioned? If so, what do you think about them? If not, why not?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. She was learning how to read and write but not how to speak because the classes were all conducted in English.
2. Listening to music for Wendy, reading books for Nick.
3. That it's free and that it uses 'gamification' to make learning more fun.

Exercises

1. plot
2. hooked
3. lyrics
4. preached
5. right up my alley
6. prior to
7. seek out
8. get in touch
9. novel
10. for the sake of it