

## Chatterbox #252 – How to think in English

### Episode description

Everyone goes through the stage of language learning when they find themselves constantly translating their target language into their native one. When do people get past that stage and start to think in English? In this Chatterbox episode, Andrew and Jeremy share their best methods for surpassing this plateau.

### Fun fact

Have you read *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry? Even if you can't read it in its original French, you can probably find it in your native language. It is thought to be the most widely translated novel, having been rendered into 361 languages and dialects!

### Expressions included in the study guide

- To know [something] all too well
- A take
- Magic solution
- To bounce ideas off [someone]
- Muscle memory
- To trust the process



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## Transcript

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Note: The words and expressions that appear in **bold text** within the transcript are discussed in more detail in the Detailed Explanations section that follows the transcript. The transcript has been edited for clarity.

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**Andrew:** Hello, everyone. My name is Andrew.

**Jeremy:** And this is Jeremy.

**Andrew:** And this is Culips.

**Andrew:** Welcome back to the Culips English Podcast. I hope you're all doing well. Today's episode is a Chatterbox episode, and this is the series where we have completely natural English conversations and we let you listen in. There's a study guide for this episode available on our website, Culips.com. So if you would like to follow along with us with the study guide and the transcript and all the goodies that are inside that guide, just visit Culips.com to give it a download.

**Andrew:** Today I am joined by my cohost Jeremy, and we are going to answer a question that we got recently from one of our listeners named Dongkoo. So, Jeremy, perhaps you could let us know what Dongkoo is curious about?

**Jeremy:** So Dongkoo is a Korean person who is living in Ontario, Canada, right now. And he told us that he's been there for 10 months working at a company there and interacting with lots of Canadian people on a daily basis. And the question was: is it possible to understand English without translating into your native language? Another follow-up question was: how can we stop translating when speaking English? So we'll talk about this in this episode today. Is it possible to speak your target language without translating everything into your mother tongue?

**Andrew:** I think this is a problem that many, many English learners have. You know, they want to speak English fluently and quickly, but something is slowing them down. And that is when they're thinking of an idea or thinking of something to say, it's coming first in their native language and then they have to think, OK, how can I change this to English, so that I can speak? But by the time you do that, it's too slow, right? Conversation moves very quickly and if you are translating in your head first, it puts you at a big disadvantage. I think especially with Korean right, Jeremy? We **know this all too well**. Korean and English are very different. If your native language is very different from English, it takes a little while to translate in your head, and this can cause problems.

**Andrew:** So, Jeremy, you and I were chatting before we pressed record about this, and I really liked your perspective on this issue, your **take**. Could you let our listeners know what you were telling me earlier?

**Jeremy:** Sure. I think that Dongkoo is going through a phase, a stage in the language learning process that everyone who learns a second language has to go through. In the beginning of your language-learning journey, you have to translate. You have to rely on your native language to understand the new language, of course. And as time goes on, you do that less and less and less.

**Jeremy:** Now, I think the difficult part for most people comes when they get to the point where they can speak the language they're learning, they can have conversations, they can make sentences pretty quickly, but they have to think a lot and they're constantly checking their grammar in their head and translating from their native language into the language that they're speaking. This is a very frustrating stage to go through because you are able to speak that language and understand that language, but not well enough to be satisfied. So you are always feeling unsatisfied, frustrated, and I'm sure that's why Dongkoo sent us this letter.

**Jeremy:** Now, as Andrew was saying, for those who don't know, Andrew and I both have been learning Korean for many years now. And we both speak Korean very frequently. And I remember going through this phase where I had to stop relying on translating from English into Korean.

**Andrew:** Jeremy, I remember it was almost like a light bulb suddenly went on and something clicked in my head and I suddenly comprehended and fully understood, kind of, Korean sentence structure. And once that clicked, everything became clear and suddenly I didn't have to think in English too much. Of course, you know, my Korean is not fluent yet. But I didn't have to think first in English and then change it to Korean. I could just speak the Korean right away.

**Andrew:** And I think what got me to that point was tons of listening practice. So tons and tons of just repetitive listening, listening all the time. I would have podcasts going, even if I didn't understand the content, just have podcasts going, while I was doing housework or, you know, out and about in the city. So I would say, you know, Dongkoo's question here is how can we stop translating? Now this might be a little bit of a frustrating answer because there's no **magic solution**, I think, it's just lots of input, right? Listening a lot, and also being patient.

**Jeremy:** Another thing to realize for Dongkoo or anyone in this phase is that there are already lots of phrases in English that you understand without needing to translate them. Thank you, please, stop, come over here. These very simple sentences. They will, they are very effortlessly understood. And judging from his email, I can tell that Dongkoo can clearly speak these basic sentences. So those have already become very natural. But the longer sentences and the more difficult structures, those take more time to digest, sort of.

**Jeremy:** With language learning, it's sort of like eating. When I eat a sandwich or some soup, eventually that food becomes my body. My arm is made of the food I've eaten for the last year or so, right? So what you eat becomes your body. And when you listen to language or you have input from the outside, eventually that language will become a part of you, it will become you. And this takes time, especially with Korean and English.

**Andrew:** OK, Jeremy, I do have perhaps two hacks that we could offer. I want **to bounce these two ideas off you** to see what you think. So the first suggestion that I have is that—I don't know if we mentioned but Dongkoo is working for an engineering company and so a lot of the conversations are around technical things, right? Technical vocabulary, talking about concrete and construction and asphalt. And so maybe one of the things that is causing some problems here is that Dongkoo is not getting enough input about this topic. So I would suggest, you know, looking for some engineering YouTube channels based on these topics, based on construction or farming or building, whatever it is specifically that Dongkoo does. Hearing those conversations over and over will help increase English fluency when talking about these subjects. What do you think about that? Is that a good suggestion?

**Jeremy:** Yeah, I think that's a great idea. Even in English, I am not very fluent in these topics that Dongkoo is working on daily, building bridges and trenches. So, of course, I would be able to communicate very well in that situation, but I don't have practice. Therefore, I lack a lot of vocabulary in these areas. So I'd say that's a great idea. You could even search for tutorials, so videos where people teach you how to do that thing. Those are very helpful sometimes, because the thing they're showing you on the screen is very visual and it helps with comprehension.

**Andrew:** In my Korean studies recently, I've been watching YouTube videos about farming and woodworking. These are really interesting topics for me. And it's cool to learn about them in Korean instead of in English. So I would encourage Dongkoo to do the same thing, just in reverse.

**Jeremy:** Yeah, yeah, it works, trust us.

**Andrew:** And the second thing that I would encourage Dongkoo to do is develop some **muscle memory** by doing some repetitive output practice. So what I mean by this is just developing, maybe, some sentences that you can use in many different situations related to the kind of content that you need to talk about. And then just, just like you practice a piano scale, you have to sit down and just practice saying them. And you could record yourself saying them, as well. So you can listen to yourself and get some feedback that way.

**Andrew:** But just developing that sharpness, that speed. I think there is a component, sometimes, where our mouth can just betray us, right? And this will also help, you know, strengthen the speed of your thinking, as well. If you have those set phrases, set expressions in your back pocket and you can just pull them out easily because you've built up the **muscle memory** at home, then I think this would help eliminate that translation stage.

**Jeremy:** Yeah, this is perfect. This is basically what actors do. Practice your lines, saying them over and over and over until you get the intonation and pronunciation and speed correct. And then once you get it right, you can go out and practice and rehearse and then perform. So I think your advice is great. I definitely did that a lot. Often with interacting with people in coffee shops in Korea, or taxi drivers. I remember imagining the situation, but I would run it over in my head before I got in the taxi. I would think about it, OK, how am I going to say this, OK, I'm gonna say it like that, when I opened the door, and I would say it the way that I practiced, and it worked out pretty well.

**Andrew:** Yeah, I've done that, actually, with some expressions, too. And it wasn't until later on, really, that I even fully understood what those expressions mean. At the time, I just kind of had the translation, OK, you say this to achieve this goal. So I'm going to practice this sentence. And then it was only until, you know, a couple of years later, when I started to understand Korean more, I realized what some of these words that I was saying actually meant. So it can be effective. Even if you don't know what it means, you can still communicate sometimes.

**Jeremy:** Yeah. And so if you just keep doing this, Dongkoo, if you keep doing this, we promise that it will get better, and eventually you'll realize that you're not translating anymore.

**Jeremy:** Actually, I think this is a good point to end with. Getting better in English, getting better in the language that you're learning, isn't like achieving something. It's not gaining a positive thing, it's more of reducing a negative thing. So the pain slowly goes away. It's so it doesn't feel like you're doing something great. Like if you're exercising and you lift weights and your muscles get bigger, you see positive feedback. But with language learning, often it is the reduction of pain and difficulty over time, slowly. And that's what the process of getting better is. It doesn't feel fun.

**Andrew:** I think of it as, like, a cloudy day. When you start learning English, everything is cloudy. And then, slowly, as the day progresses and you learn more, the clouds roll away and it becomes sunnier and you can see everything more clearly. You can see the scenery, you can see the city, and you're able to understand more. And so I totally agree with you. You don't have that direct feedback that, like, bodybuilders might have, right? They can just see their arms growing. So that's kind of frustrating. But, Dongkoo, just **trust the process**. Keep on keeping on and you'll get there.

**Jeremy:** And if you do end up recording yourself, you can listen back later on, in a month or two or six months, and you can then notice your improvement. That can be a form of feedback. We promise it will get better.

**Andrew:** Dongkoo, thank you again for the question, and thank you for listening, everyone. If you have a question or a topic that you would like us to talk about, please email us. Our address is [contact@Culips.com](mailto:contact@Culips.com). And you can also connect with us on social media. We are on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram. Simply search for the Culips English Podcast and we'll pop right up.

**Andrew:** Again, there's a study guide for this episode available to all Culips members on the Culips website, [Culips.com](http://Culips.com). If you'd like to sign up and become a Culips member, it's a great way to improve your English fluency by studying with the guides that we custom make to help you improve your English and, at the same time, you can support Culips, too. So to sign up and become Culips member, just visit [Culips.com](http://Culips.com).

**Andrew:** That is it for us today, but we'll be back soon with another brand-new Culips episode and we'll talk to you then. Goodbye.

**Jeremy:** Bye, everyone.

## Detailed Explanations

### To know [something] all too well

#### Phrase

In this beginning of this episode, Andrew and Jeremy share some of the same concerns regarding language learning as Culips listener Dongkoo. Andrew says that they **know all too well** the difficulty of translating in your head while speaking. **To know [something] all too well** is a phrase you can use when you are very familiar with a subject. You are lightheartedly saying how much experience you have with the topic.

Here are a couple more examples with **to know [something] all too well**:

**Mikey:** Oh, no! I'm going to miss my flight. Do you know what to do in this situation?

**Brooke:** Don't remind me. I **know that all too well**.

**Mikey:** Really?

**Brooke:** Over the years, I think I've missed about seven flights. It's not fun.

**Mikey:** So you can help me?

**Brooke:** Yup, no problem.

**Harley:** I'm planning a trip to Morocco, but I'm really unfamiliar with the country. Do you know anything about it?

**Charles:** I **know it all too well**. My family is from there.

**Harley:** I thought your family was from France.

**Charles:** Actually, I was born in Morocco but grew up in France. We would often go back and forth. What cities are you planning to visit?

## A take

Noun

In this episode, Andrew asks Jeremy for his **take** on the topic of translating in one's head during language learning. **A take** is someone's opinion. In the same sentence, Andrew says he liked Jeremy's perspective. In this sense, **take** and perspective are interchangeable. It is also common to put **take** in question form, as in when someone asks, "What's your **take** on this?"

Here are a couple more examples with **a take**:

**Peyton:** There have been so many changes in the world this year.

**Erin:** I know. It's been interesting, to say the least.

**Peyton:** And now there's talk of defunding the police. What's your **take** on that?

**Erin:** That's a tough one. You definitely need police in any society. However, I understand that normal city police departments don't need military-style equipment.

**Peyton:** Yeah. That's what most people are saying. I still don't know what I think about it all.

**Winnie:** Do you think your friend Dave would like to join us for supper?

**Ismail:** He doesn't go out much, so I'm not sure.

**Winnie:** I'll call him up. What's his cell phone number?

**Ismail:** He doesn't have one.

**Winnie:** He doesn't have a cell phone? How come?

**Ismail:** He lives a very minimalist lifestyle. He's almost like a hermit. If you want to talk to him, you have to go see him at home.

**Winnie:** Wow. That's an interesting **take** on life.



## Magic solution

### Idiom

In responding to Dongkoo's questions about learning a language, Andrew says it's difficult for him to give an answer because there is no **magic solution**. A **magic solution** is a quick and easy shortcut to solve your problem. Just imagine how easy it would be if you could simply wave a magic wand and instantly speak perfect English. As you know, that does not exist. There is no **magic solution**. You need to put in the time and effort to succeed.

Here are a couple more examples with **magic solution**:

**Jon:** I saw an interesting commercial on television. This company was offering a way to make easy money on the side. I'm thinking of signing up.

**Sienna:** Don't do it.

**Jon:** Why not? I could give it a try.

**Sienna:** I wouldn't trust anyone who is offering a **magic solution**. It sounds like a scam to me. Be careful.

**Cleo:** I've been studying Punjabi lately. Do you have any suggestions or study tips for me?

**Mandeep:** Basically the same as every other language you've studied. Read a lot. Speak a lot. Listen to Punjabi content a lot. And do it every day.

**Cleo:** That's so much effort. I was hoping you would know a **magic solution** or something.

**Mandeep:** Nope. You have to put in the effort. It's that simple.

## To bounce ideas off [someone]

### Idiom

Andrew came up with possible solutions to Dongkoo's questions and wants **to bounce them off Jeremy**. **To bounce ideas off [someone]** is to share these ideas with someone to find out their opinions on them. You want their feedback in order to know how good your ideas are.

Another common expression is **to throw [something] against the wall and see what sticks**. In this case, the good ideas stick to the wall and the bad ones fall to the floor. Similarly, when you **bounce ideas off [someone]**, you keep the good ideas and throw the bad ones away.

Here are a couple more examples with **to bounce ideas off [someone]**:

**Elsa:** Can I talk to you in my office for a minute?

**Charles:** Sure. What's up?

**Elsa:** You know we've been working on the Mackenzie project since April, right?

**Charles:** Yes, I do.

**Elsa:** Recently, we've encountered a few problems. I was wondering if I can **bounce a few ideas off you**. I'd like to know what you think.

**Charles:** Ask away.

**Felicity:** What do you do for work, Reggie?

**Reggie:** I'm a consultant.

**Felicity:** I see. What exactly does that entail?

**Reggie:** Basically, I go to meetings and let them **bounce ideas off me**.

**Felicity:** That's it?

**Reggie:** Of course, I need to give them a written report afterwards. That part is quite time-consuming, but I like it.

## Muscle memory

Noun

In this episode, Andrew encourages Dongkoo to develop **muscle memory** by doing repetitive output practice. **Muscle memory** is an idea that comes from the world of sports. When you practice a certain movement repeatedly, such as shooting free throws in basketball, for example, your muscles develop a kind of memory for the movement. Over time, you get better and better at the movement because your muscles remember it very well. The same thing applies to repetitive practice when speaking a second language. The more you practice, the greater your skills will become because of this accumulated memory.

Here are a couple more examples with **muscle memory**:

**Pedro:** I'm scared of going back to Spain. My Spanish skills are terrible.

**Martine:** But you're a native speaker.

**Pedro:** I know, but I haven't spoken in a long time.

**Martine:** Don't worry. It's just like riding a bike. Every time I go back to France, my French is a little rusty. But then **muscle memory** kicks in and I'm quickly comfortable again. I'm sure the same will happen with you.

**Pedro:** All right. Thanks.

**Taran:** Wow, you're really good at shooting three-pointers. You must play basketball a few times a week.

**Stuart:** Not at all. I haven't played basketball in years.

**Taran:** How come you're making every shot?

**Stuart:** **Muscle memory**, I guess. I used to play every day when I was younger. My old muscles still remember what to do.

## To trust the process

### Idiom

As a final piece of advice for Dongkoo, Andrews tells him **to trust the process**. **To trust the process** is to believe that if your methods are good, you will succeed in the end. In this case, the process is how you learn and practice your English. If you do everything correctly, whether you feel change every day or not, you will reach your goal.

Here are a couple more examples with **to trust the process**:

**Lleyton:** How have your language studies been going?

**Katie:** So-so. I feel like I'm not making any improvements.

**Lleyton:** Yeah. I feel like that too sometimes.

**Katie:** But I just need to remind myself **to trust the process**. If I continue on the right path, I'll get there eventually.

**Lleyton:** That's a good way of looking at it.

**Margo:** Is everything OK?

**Nate:** I'm so frustrated with this homework.

**Margo:** What is it?

**Nate:** Math. I can't get my head around these equations. I'm not good at math.

**Margo:** Don't get too down on yourself. Everyone struggles. Math is logical. Just **trust the process**. Everything will fall into place sooner or later.

**Nate:** All right. I'll try.

## Quiz

### 1. What does it mean to trust the process?

- a) to believe in a higher power
- b) to put your money in the bank
- c) to believe that your methods will help you reach your goal
- d) to eat processed foods

### 2. Which of the following words does NOT mean a take?

- a) an opinion
- b) a judgment
- c) a point of view
- d) a moment in time

### 3. What is a good example of muscle memory?

- a) remembering your appointment at the gym
- b) remembering the feeling when you won the game
- c) remembering how to play a song on the guitar after years of not playing
- d) remembering to take your protein powder

### 4. True or false? To know something all too well means you are unfamiliar with the subject.

- a) true
- b) false

### 5. Why would you bounce ideas off someone?

- a) to know their opinion
- b) to show that your opinion is better than theirs
- c) to embarrass them
- d) to show you know what you're talking about

## Writing and Discussion Questions

1. How much do you think language learning depends on practice, and how much do you think it depends on natural talent?
2. What is something you know all too well?
3. If you could have a magic solution for language learning (like eating a pill or having a chip implanted into your head), would you take it? Why or why not?
4. When do you think you have to trust the process, even if it doesn't feel right?
5. For what kind of activity do you have great muscle memory?

## Quiz Answers

1. c   2. d   3. c   4. b   5. a

### Episode credits

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