

Chatterbox #251 – Interview with Jonson Lee

Episode description

In this edition of Chatterbox, Andrew talks with Jonson Lee. Jonson is originally from Seoul, South Korea but has learned English to a very high level. Jonson talks about his English language learning journey and shares some great tips about how to become a better English speaker.



Fun fact

Jonson is a podcaster and Youtuber! You can find him online at <http://www.spongemind.org/> and <https://www.youtube.com/spongemindtv>

Transcript

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.

Andrew: Hello, everyone. My name is Andrew and this is the Culips English Podcast.

Hello, hello. Welcome back to Culips. You're listening to Chatterbox. The Culips series that's designed to help you improve your English fluency by listening in to completely natural English conversations. And I'm really excited about today's episode, everyone. For a long time, I've been a big fan of Jonson Lee. He's a podcaster, a YouTuber and a language coach. And he's just a really knowledgeable guy about the best practices for learning English. I recently had the opportunity to talk with Jonson and in this episode, you'll get to hear that conversation.

Jonson is originally from Korea, but he speaks really high level, fluent English and he's also learning German right now too. He's an all around funny guy and is full of wisdom and insight about learning English and I think you'll find our conversation really interesting.

Some of the key points we discussed were:

- How watching TV helped Jonson to boost his English fluency and helped him to keep up with native speakers
- The right kind of approach to take when it feels like you aren't making progress with your learning
- Why saving time and studying efficiently isn't necessarily a good thing
- How to pick good study materials

So, I hope you'll find Jonson as interesting and motivational as I do. He can be found on the internet at spongemind.org (dot org) and on the SpongeMind Podcast, which he co-hosts with Jeremy, Culips' very own Jeremy.

And everyone, the transcript for this episode is completely free for everyone. So if you'd like to follow along with the transcript, and I think that's a great idea, I highly recommend that you can download it on our website Culips.com. So, without any further delay, here it is my conversation with Jonson Lee.

So I am joined here today by Jonson. Jonson, welcome to Culips.

Jonson: All right. Thanks for having me here, appreciate it.

Andrew : Yeah, it's an honour to get to talk with you, actually, because you are one of the hosts of the SpongeMind Podcast, which is one of my favourite podcasts about language learning.

Jonson: Thank you so much.

Andrew: It's specifically about learning English and learning Korean. So this is perfect for me as a Korean learner and an English speaker.

Jonson: Plus, you are producing a podcast too for English learners too as well.

Andrew: Yeah. So it's right down my alley. Of course, Jeremy, who also helps us out at Culips, is the other host of SpongeMind. So if our listeners would like to check that out, I think especially if you are a Korean listening to Culips, then you should google SpongeMinds and give it a listen. But Jonson for those of our listeners who don't know you, could you just briefly introduce yourself?

Jonson: Sure. My name is Jonson Lee. J-O-N-S-O-N L-E-E. I think everybody in Korea knows how to spell Lee there, or Kim or Park or Choi. So, I run this podcast called SpongeMind. Also, I run this YouTube channel called SpongeMind TV. And both are about language learning, especially, specifically for those who are learning Korean. And those people who are living in Korea learning English. So it's been going really well so far. I've been doing it for quite a few years, four years.

Andrew: OK, awesome. And actually, I have a question about your name right off the start because Jonson is a very common last name among English speakers. As a Korean, I imagine that this is a nickname for you, right? So why did you select Jonson as a first name?

Jonson: Yeah, why not Susie or Carol, right?

Andrew: Right, you have so many options.

Jonson: That's right. There's certainly better.

Andrew: Yeah, I think it's cool. It's a good choice. I really liked the name, but I'm curious what your logic was behind the choice?

Jonson: So my original name in Korean is J-O-N-G-S-E-U-N-G, Jongseung. And as you can probably imagine, in America, no one could pronounce it properly, it kind of bothers me when people mispronounce my name, just a little bit, and plus this not really a nice thing to do to other people too. So, I should I decided to come up with the English name, but you know, with the "H" in it is like last name plus, it has an implication obviously. So decided to run with J-O-N-S-O-N without the "H" and so far it's been going well, except

when I googled up my English name, there was some kind of porn star guy popped up. So that wasn't very nice.

Andrew: Yeah, that could happen, I suppose, yeah. But that makes sense.

Jonson: That's not me, yeah.

Andrew: That's not you, it's just a kind of a similar sound to your Korean name. OK. Awesome.

Jonson: That's right.

Andrew: So Jonson, I wanted to talk to you today about your English language learning journey. The listeners of our podcasts, are English language learners from all over the world, not just from Korea, but from all corners of the world. And I think it's really great to have high level English speakers that have learned English not native speakers, but English language learners on Culips from time to time, just because I think it's motivational for people to hear success stories.

Jonson: Totally, because I'm learning German too. But, whenever I see an Asian guy, or American guy learning German, and speaking really fluently, that's actually more inspiring than native speakers speaking fluently, so.

Andrew: I totally agree with you there. And so why don't we bring it all the way back to the beginning.

Jonson: A long time ago.

Andrew: A long time ago, so maybe you could share when the first time you learned English was, what was the start of your journey?

Jonson: So back in those days, we didn't learn English in elementary school. Nowadays, everybody learns English early on. But back then I think I learned my alphabet in middle school, right? So compared to today, I started pretty late, like everybody else back then. And back then listening, learning English through listening and reading wasn't really an option. I mean, nobody really learned English that way. It's all about getting those higher score, right? Using textbooks and learning grammar rules, you know doing the drill. That was pretty much it. So, that's how I learned it.

Andrew: I see. So in a very traditional classroom setting.

Jonson: That's right, but I don't recommend it.

Andrew: Yeah, don't recommend it. I think we've evolved a little bit in our understanding of how to learn languages these days. By the way, where was this? Where's your hometown?

Jonson: Oh, Seoul, Korea.

Andrew: Seoul, OK.

Jonson: Gangnam Style or.

Andrew: Gangnam Style. And these days, in Korea, there are tons of foreign- like native English speakers. I think most public schools have an English native speaking English teacher. Actually, I worked at a public elementary school for a while, several years ago doing this job as well. But when you were a student, did you have this kind of native teacher at your school that you could interact with?

Jonson: Oh, not at all, actually the exact opposite. So I can kind of mimic my English teacher that I had back in middle school. When he was reading the English textbook. He sounded like this, "New York is a big city" and we just repeat after him, right? So that's how the game look like, that's how, that's what the game looked like.

Andrew: That's funny. You know, you are learning German, as you just mentioned and actually, I took German in high school. I took a couple of German classes in high school and I had a German teacher, that was pretty much the same. He was just a regular Canadian, English speaking guy that, I think he was actually the gym teacher, and they just assigned him to teach German. So he did the same thing, sort of read the German textbook in a terrible German accent, and we would repeat. So I know a little bit about this.

Jonson: But you didn't know, right?

Andrew: Yeah, we didn't know, I didn't know.

Jonson: Whether it's good or not, right?

Andrew: Yeah, exactly. So then, how did you get from that level of kind of a bad classroom experience to where you are now? What changed? What helped you to become a good English speaker?

Jonson: That's a good, good question. So I learned English like everybody else back in Korea. So, I got into college and then English wasn't very important for me, drinking beer was way more important, right?

Andrew: A bigger priority.

Jonson: Was way more important of course and English just wasn't, not my priority at all right? And I graduated, I got a job, I got married, I had a kid. So my entire life happened in Korea. And then I moved to the States when I was in my late 20s. So that's when I started realizing that oh, man, the English that I learned back in school for many, many years, isn't actually helpful for me, not not much. Although, I learned a lot of vocabulary, a lot grammar

rules. But I realized to have a conversation with a native speaker, it required a different set of skills, right? And I just couldn't understand what people are saying, I knew I was understanding, you know, some words there, some words here and I knew they were speaking in English that I learned in school. I just couldn't like keep up with the native speakers, right?

So, I started watching a lot of TV with the closed captions on for hearing impaired. And in a way I was hearing impaired, because I could not hear the words that I was supposed to know. So, in a way I was, so it was pretty helpful, listening and reading, reading the subtitle at the same time. So that was kind of a big turning point for me, for my English learning.

Andrew: OK. And do you remember what series you watched on TV? Was there a show or a series that was your favourite back then?

Jonson: Oh, first of all, Jerry Springer. I should thank the show for it.

Andrew: Jerry Springer.

Jonson: Do you know that show, Jerry Springer?

Andrew: Yeah. It was popular when I was maybe around seven or eight years old and actually, my parents wouldn't let me watch that show because it was, to, I guess it wasn't appropriate for children. Like it's a talk show, it's based around scandal, right?

Jonson: Oh, yeah, totally.

Andrew: Yeah. There would be couples fighting about cheating or divorce.

Jonson: That's right. That's right. Yeah. You sleep with my brother? No, I slept with your older brother and your uncle. Yeah, that.

Andrew: But I guess that would be really engaging, you know? Really interesting.

Jonson: Oh, of course, because back in Korea, our TV culture wasn't like that at all. If people speak profanity, if people have kind of ugly, quote-unquote, ugly stories, they don't come up on the TV show, right? But in America, it was, you know it was acceptable. In fact, it was even entertaining for many people. So, it was fascinating for me. So it's showing that aspect of human lives, right? And they spoke English really well, they were native speakers. They were fluent, a lot of vocabulary and oh, that's what you say right before you throw your chair. All right, write it down.

Andrew: So the next time you need to throw a chair, you're ready.

Jonson: That's right.

Andrew: Yeah, I guess one of the benefits of that kind of show too, is it's unscripted, right? And it's, you know, like when you watch a comedy, like Friends, for example, everything's scripted, it's been worked out exactly what the characters are going to say. But Jerry Springer was just off the cuff, natural conversation.

Jonson: Yeah, so a lot of beeping.

Andrew: A lot of beeping. Yeah, these days, for our listeners that don't know these days, there's to an extent a lot more swearing on TV, especially, you know, on Netflix and stuff. But maybe from the 90s and earlier, all swearing on TV was beeped. So that you wouldn't actually hear what the profanity was that was being said.

Jonson: Right, right. But I wouldn't say Jerry Springer was the only material I watched, then probably I'll be speaking very differently than I do now. I actually watched a lot of interviews. Interviews of politicians, actors, singers and they were tremendously helpful, because it's the interchange, right? Question, answer, question, answer.

Andrew: Right. OK. That's great. Another question that I wanted to ask you was about something that we call the intermediate plateau, the plateau which means, I mean, I've been there before. I think I technically kind of am here with my Korean learning, where I've gotten to a point where I can do a lot of things in Korean. I can have conversations, but getting to that really high level is a struggle, it's a battle. And so, did you go through anything like this with your English language learning?

Jonson: So, I mean, you have to remember that I did learn English before I came to America, right? For many, many years in school. So I wasn't a beginner, I was just I was a beginner at actually using the language. So that was a skill I was requiring. So probably, I could speak to that much better with my German learning process, because I just reached my intermediate level, in my opinion. And I do feel the plateau, right? I'm not improving, I don't think I'm better than, you know, months ago. But at the beginner, every day is a miracle, right? It's like 500% improvement every day, right? I learned two words today. I only knew one-word yesterday.

But you don't get that anymore, right? After learning for three years, five years. So you feel like you're spinning the wheel. But what I realize is that you don't, you shouldn't really, or you don't have to focus on the peak of the mountain, when you're walking. Instead, you should focus on the various steps you're taking. And you should focus and your surroundings, like all these great, you know, sceneries, nature, fruits, you know? All these strange animals, you can look at, all the fruits, you can pick and eat. And then you can walk much farther by doing that, instead of just looking at the peak all the time. And thinking, "Oh man, when am I gonna get there? In a year? 10 years? 20 years? I don't know. I'm so tired." I think that's a mistake a lot of people make.

Andrew: Yeah, when we have that kind of proverb in English, that it's not about the destination, it's about the journey, right?

Jonson: Totally true.

Andrew: Yeah, I think that's a good way. That's a good mindset. A good way to look at it, is just to enjoy the process of learning and don't be so focused on the end goal.

Jonson: It's a bit like riding a subway train, right? So, when you want to get to your destination, you get on the train, you just stay there. You stay on it. That's all you have to do. You don't have to do anything else. But a lot of language learners make this mistake of, "Oh, man, maybe this red line is not going to get me there fast enough. So I'm gonna get off and switch to the blue line." "Oh, man, maybe there's a better, faster line over there. Oh, the green line, I should get on it!" Then you're not going anywhere. You constantly get like, on and on and on, on and off, on and off, on and off. I think that's a mistake a lot of people make too. You should stay on it. That's all you have to do.

Andrew: I totally agree with that as well. And to an extent, I think I'm guilty of that with my Korean learning. You know, I was so concerned for a little while about studying the most efficient way possible that I spent so much time looking at different resources, changing resources, reading about learning, but not actually spending time learning.

Jonson: Reading about the learning in English, right?

Andrew: Yeah, exactly. So you kind of think like you're progressing. But when I realized that, I was like, I need to spend more time just with the language, that is the most important thing. And it doesn't really matter if the quality of the material is there, as long as I'm spending time with language, then I'm going to make improvement.

Jonson: I'm kind of glad that you brought up the word efficient, right? You tried to be efficient in terms of language learning. You tried to save time, right? I want spend as few hours as possible to get the biggest result. But in reality, because I always compare language learning to relationship, right? Getting to know someone or dating someone or you know, having a marriage. When you have an important person in your life and when you want to deepen the relationship, you don't wanna save time. You don't want to be efficient. Instead, you want to spend more time with her, right? So efficiency, I think, or the idea of efficiency is the biggest enemy in language learning. I mean, you should stop trying to save time. Instead, you should start being generous with your time, as the language will pay you back.

Andrew: Another point that I completely agree with. And once I realized that, that's when I started to notice making a lot of progress in my Korean. You just need to put in the time, you need to become close with the language. It's like a friendship or a relationship, just like you said, right? The more time you spend, the more you'll learn. And then the more you learn, the more enjoyment you can get out of the language, you have access to different material. You can start reading novels and watching movies and listening to interviews and reaping the benefits of the language.

Jonson: I mean, it's fun, right?

Andrew: Yeah, yeah absolutely.

Jonson: You can say, you know, consuming Korea media, having conversations in Korean, these are actually fun for you, right? And why would you want to spend fewer hours on it?

Andrew: Right. And then yeah, why would you want to spend less time doing that? Yeah, exactly.

Jonson: You want to spend more time with it, you want to spend more time on it, then your progress will be even more exponential.

Andrew: Totally. Jonson, I don't want to take up too much of your time here. So we'll maybe wrap things up quickly. But I do have a couple more questions. I want to ask you some things I'm curious about. Learning German now as you are and learning English, are there any things that are different between the two? What's- Are there different challenges? Are you approaching it in a different way?

Jonson: I don't think so about the differences between the languages, but about how I approach it in general. So when I was learning English, it wasn't my choice. It basically got pushed down my throat, right? And that's the case for so many Koreans, right? English actually one of the biggest sources of stress for Korean people. So I think that's where a lot of people have that sense of insecurity about English, right? And I certainly do have it too, although, I'm pretty comfortable speaking it. I can understand things, I can get by. But deep down, I still have that sense of, you know, like, inferiority, it's just not good enough. I'm just not good enough, right? But with German, I don't have that mentality at all. It's always fun, although my German level is far lower than my English. So, I found it super interesting, actually, I don't feel any insecurity about German. I make tons of mistakes, my pronunciation is sometimes horrible, and I have difficulty understanding native speakers too, but none of it really matters to me. But with English, like every kind of mistake I make you just kick yourself at night in your bed. Oh, so that was a horrible, why did I say that?

Andrew: Yeah.

Jonson: So I found, I find the difference most interesting between, not between the two languages. But between those two processes, learning German and learning English.

Andrew: Yeah, that's fascinating. And why did you choose German, by the way? What attracted you to that language?

Jonson: Jeremy told me to actually. Jeremy told me to learn a language when you start, when you started our podcast together and you said, you should start learning a new language otherwise, you could never put yourself in the beginner shoes. So I started

looking around, so which language should I learn? I just picked German because I love classical music.

Andrew: OK. Jonson, final question for you, is about any maybe tips that you could share with our listeners about learning English. Maybe it's a study technique that you found to be really beneficial, or maybe just a motivational or encouraging phrase or something that you could share with our listeners.

Jonson: I guess this tip I'm about to give you or give everyone, is very related to what I said like five minutes ago. So, when you try to choose a material for you, when you try to choose your study method for you, don't try to pick something that will save you time. Instead, try to pick something that will make you want to spend more time. So it's the exact opposite approach of efficiency. So that's my tip. So whatever it is, whether it's drama or book or just learning method, if it makes you spend more time on studying English, then go with it, run with it.

Andrew: I recently just watched a series on Netflix called Ozark. And this drama is so addicting that at the end of each episode, I just wanted to watch one more. And I'd have to, I'd have to tell myself, no, just go to bed. But I think what you want to do, is find that content in English that is just that, oh, just one more, just one more page, just one more episode. And if you find that kind of material, then the learning process is going to be super enjoyable. And that's what we want, right? We want it to be enjoyable.

Jonson: Totally. Even if it's above your level, you will overcome it if it's fun.

Andrew: Yeah, right. Exactly. Yes. All right. Jonson, I think we'll wrap it up here. Thanks so much for coming on to Culips. It was great to talk with you.

Jonson: Thank you for having me here.

Andrew: Yeah. So take care. We'll talk to you later.

Jonson: All right, you too, Andrew.

Andrew: Thanks again to Jonson for coming on Culips. I hope you all enjoyed our conversation and found it educational and thought provoking.

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