Transcript

INTRODUCTION

00:00 Welcome back to the English with Rhys podcast. My name is Rhys, I'm a master's-level English teacher from the UK, and I'm here to help you level up your English.

So, in today's episode, we're gonna be talking about two things. First, the countless quirks of English. And second, how much English you actually need to have everyday conversations with a native.

As you listen through today's episode, you'll discover an exciting way to improve your pronunciation just from reading, you'll build on your advanced vocabulary about learning languages, and you'll find out how many words you already know.

For Serious and Dedicated Members, The Podcast Course has activities to help you learn and remember the vocabulary from this episode much more effectively, functional language for making an argument, you'll become familiar with
01:00 something called the IPA which I'll talk about a little more later on, and, of course, you'll have questions to improve your listening comprehension.

If you aren't already a member, you'll find a link in the description. You'll also find a link to the free transcript which will help you follow and understand this episode, or if you're watching this as a video you could just hit the subtitles button.

MAIN PART

There are so many weird and wonderful things about English that make it funny at times but also puzzling at others. Let's take a look at some of the quirks that make English so interesting.

Let's start with the alphabet. It's one of the first things that we learn in English class, but have you ever stopped to think about how weird it is?

Take the letter A. How many words do you know where A makes an /eɪ/ sound?
02:00 Now, you might be thinking about the words, 'play' or maybe 'cake', and, yeah, you're kind of right, but that A needs help from other letters. In 'play' it needs the Y to make the /eɪ/ sound, and in 'cake' it needs the E. Even the word 'a' is most often not pronounced as /eɪ/. It's pronounce /ə/. "Can I have /ə/ glass of water?". So, why isn't the alphabet more like /æ/, /b/, /k/?

B is another odd one. B is a consonant, so it never actually makes that /biː/ sound, just /b/.

And G. There's a reason that the word 'greedy' starts with G, and that's because G is taking sounds from other letters. G already has the /g/ sound as in 'girl', but for some reason, it thinks it has the right to the /ʤ/ sound as in 'genius'. In my opinion, we should give the /ʤ/ sound back to J where it belongs!

03:00 Q is in the same boat. Q thinks it can join the alphabet and make a /k/ sound. Like in 'queen'. But, sorry to break this to you, Q, but we already have a K for

that. And you can't even do the job by yourself. You need a U to hold your hand which I think is pretty sad for a letter if you ask me. It's no wonder that Q hides in the middle of the alphabet, hoping that nobody will notice it.

And X. What is X's deal? Sometimes it's a /gz/ like in 'exam', sometimes it's a /ks/ like in 'axe', and sometimes it's a /z/ like in 'xylophone'. Okay, it does many things, but we already have letters that do those jobs.

But the worst offender, ladies and gentlemen, is the letter C. It seems to me that C does *nothing unique* for English. It's just sitting there, in third place in the
04:00 alphabet, mind you, trying to fit in like a toad in a group of frogs. Like, hear me out.

What sounds can you make with a C? Most of the time it's a /k/ as in 'cat' or a /s/ as in 'face'. Both /k/ and /s/ have letters, K and S. So, what is C doing?!

You might say, "Oh well, what about /ʧ/, Rhys? You can't have /ʧ/ without a C". Well, actually, yes you can. You see, a /ʧ/ is just a /ʃ/ with a /t/ on it, okay? Try it for yourself. Share. Okay, we've got that word 'share' with an S-H. But put a /t/, a T, at the beginning. /t/ share, /t/ share, /t/share, chair. Now, I'm saying 'chair', C-H. So, a /ʧ/ is just the same as a /ʃ/ with a /t/. Okay, so we don't need C for this either!

And don't get me started on /ʃ/, okay? We can make this sound with a C, like in
05:00 'ocean', but most of the time, we're using S-H to make a /ʃ/ sound. But why do we have two letters for one sound? Who decided that? It's confusing and it's

disorganised. So, I say we should give the /ʃ/ to C, so it finally has something to do.

It's a similar story for /θ/ and /ð/. We spell these with a T-H, of course and these sounds are so common in English but we don't have a letter for them? We have to put two different letters together to make that /ð/ or /θ/ sound? I think that's quite strange. Maybe we should have one symbol for that.

And then there's silent letters which I know a lot of my students don't like. But, they're a link to history, ladies and gents. The 'K' in 'knee' takes us back to Old English and tells a story of how people spoke to each other back then. But
06:00 should it be a part of the word if nobody pronounces it anymore?

I believe that if we created English today, the alphabet wouldn't look like this. It would be efficient and organised. But I guess our ancestors didn't have time for that. Maybe they were too busy to put any thought into it.

But I'm jealous of you Italian listeners. Just about everything in Italian is spelled how it sounds. This means you don't have to worry about spelling something wrong, and you can basically read any Italian word and pronounce it perfectly. In Italy, people don't ask you how to spell something, they ask you to say something more slowly. Ooh, wow!

So why doesn't English do that too? Well, the reason for this is that English isn't just one language, not really. It's like a group of 300 languages standing on top
07:00 of each other, wearing a big coat, trying to pretend that they're just one language.

And you can't even tell people that you're learning 300 languages, or they'll look at you like you've got snot on your face.

But don't worry ladies and gentlemen, English with Rhys is here, and I've got a solution. If I controlled English, which, let's be clear, I don't, I would ditch the Roman letters that we use today and I would start using the IPA. Let me explain what that means.

The IPA is a set of symbols that represent all the sounds in every language. Each sound is called a 'phoneme' and it's the smallest sound you can make. So, for example, the word 'cat' has three phonemes: /k/, /æ/, /t/. My name, Rhys, is four letters but it's actually three phonemes too: /r/, /iː/, /s/, okay?

08:00 Now, across all languages, there are over 800 phonemes, but English only uses 44. Now, I know that's still more symbols than we have in the English alphabet, but trust me, it's worth learning all 44 if it means we never have to worry about spelling or pronunciation again.

If we want to make things a little bit simpler, it could be argued that we only need symbols for 36 phonemes in English.

There are two groups of phonemes in the IPA: monophthongs and diphthongs, okay? Now, 'mono-' means one, as in 'monorail', and 'di-' or 'di-' means two, like in 'dilemma'.

So, let me show you what I mean. We have the sound /aɪ/, right? And it seems like it's just one sound, /aɪ/. But, if you slow it down, you'll hear that it's actually
09:00 two sounds. Okay, listen up. /aɪ/, /aɪ/, /ɑːɪ/, /ɑː/ /ɪ/. Yes, we have an /ɑː/ and an /ɪ/. That's how we make 'I', okay, and you'll never hear 'I' the same again. That's because /aɪ/ is a diphthong, okay. It has two sounds, and it moves from one sound to another. Okay, that's why, sometimes, we like to count that as one sound, /aɪ/, okay?

So, if we get rid of those, we have 36 symbols left, and we've just solved the English alphabet. You're welcome.

If you're watching the video for this episode, or you've decided to search up the IPA chart, you might notice something a little bit interesting. You see, at school, we're always taught there are five vowels, right? A, E, I, O, U, and sometimes Y. But if you're looking at this chart, you will notice that there are actually twelve vowel sounds. How interesting is that?

10:00 The sounds are /iː/, /ɪ/, /uː/, /ʊ/, /ɛ/, /ə/, /ɜː/, /ɔː/, /æ/, /ʌ/, /ɑː/, /ɒ/. Okay, and you might notice that two of those are so similar. We have 'uh'. We have two kinds of 'uh'. Okay, we have the /ə/ as in 'teacher', okay, that's more British English, /ə/, /ˈtiːʧə/, and then we have the /ʌ/ in 'up'. What's up, teacher? Okay, if you listen to that phrase, you can hear a small difference. /wɒts ʌp ˈtiːʧə/, okay?

So, in some accents, you won't notice at all and you could make an argument that we don't need both of them. So, I say that we keep the / ə/ from 'teacher'.

So, by using the IPA instead of the alphabet, we could simplify English and make it easier to pronounce and spell and, of course, learn. And if we only need to
11:00 learn 35 symbols from the IPA, well, it's not so bad, right?

So, let's stick with the IPA just a second, okay? I'm a linguistics nerd and I'd like to nerd out. Even if we don't use the IPA to spell words right now, it's still helpful for you to know if you're learning English, and I mean that for natives too. Natives have words they don't know too, of course.

So, when you're reading the dictionary, you'll often see these symbols and they're actually pronunciation guides, okay? And any other pronunciation-based book or maybe even my videos and this podcast course if you're taking it. You'll see these symbols and, just by reading them, you can learn how to say every word without ever even hearing it. Isn't that magical?

You see how breaking English up into its tiny, little, individual sounds, makes it
12:00 much easier to learn? We could even simplify grammar and vocabulary by taking some inspiration and some information from other languages. So, Mandarin, for example, has a lot of logic to it that we could learn from.

Let's look at some examples. In English, we have five different words for the first person singular: I, me, my, myself, and mine. In Mandarin, we only need 'wǒ', which means 'I', 'me', and 'myself'. For 'my' and 'mine', we just add 'de'; 'wǒ de'. And, if we want to make it plural; talk about 'we', and 'us', we add 'men'; 'wǒmen'. Okay, is it 'ours'? 'Wǒmen de'. For 'you', 'yours', and 'yourself', we use 'nǐ',

‘nǐmen’, and ‘nǐmen de’. And for ‘he’, ‘she’, singular ‘they’, and ‘it’, we only need one word: ‘tā’.

We can make all the pronouns, including possessive pronouns, by just learning
13:00 five words instead of the 30 that we use in English, okay? So, we can save space there. We can save time.

Now, of course, Mandarin isn’t perfect either; it has exceptions. But, we can still learn from the logical side of other languages. English already steals from other languages, so why not take the best and most logical parts to make English even simpler?

For a native speaker, it’s easy to take English and its quirks for granted. But for learners like you, there’s a lot to get used to. Like how sometimes there are rules you learn about English but then you find out that they’re not always true.

One example that you were probably taught at school, because I remember I was, is “I before E, except after C”. But actually, there are many, many words that break this rule, like if you’re my weird neighbour, Keith, who bought eight foreign delicacies. None of those words follow the rule.

14:00 Nathan Cunningham, a University of Warwick statistician took a list of 350,000 words and he found that 75% of the time, ‘I’ comes before ‘E’. Now, he checked it again, but he only looked at words where ‘I’ and ‘E’ came after C, and he found the same thing. Even after ‘C’, ‘I’ comes before ‘E’ 75% of the time. So, we can

forget that second part, "…except C". Now, the new rule is "I before E, usually". Okay, that's how you can remember it.

This is just one of countless examples of where English can be tricky with its rules and its exceptions. But don't worry. With practice and patience, you will get the hang of it.

In a moment, we're going to talk about how long it takes to learn English. But
15:00 first, I want to give some honourable mentions to some of the other strange quirks of English.

Homonyms. Words that sound or look the same but have different meanings. So, for example, "The doctor had many patients", okay? So were a lot of sick people waiting to see the doctor, or was the doctor good at waiting calmly?

Another example, "We saw her duck". Okay, did we see her pet duck or did we see her lower her head to avoid something?

Then we have irregular verbs. Now, normally, when we want to use a verb in the past tense, we add '-ed', don't we? But this doesn't work for all words. So, you can't say "I runned", "I writed", "I swimmed". We have to learn which words follow the rules and which words don't, in the same way that we learn other vocabulary.

16:00 Idioms can be another challenge for English learners. My students often ask me to teach them idioms because they can be confusing. For example, why do we say, "I've got too much on my plate" when really what I mean is, "I've got too

many things to do"? Personally, I think idioms add personality to a language and can be a lot of fun once you understand them, but I know they can be difficult at first.

Overall, English a weird and wonderful language that can be frustrating at times but entertaining too. And with practice and a sense of humour, you'll get the hang of it.

But how much practice do you need to become fluent in English?

AD BREAK

17:11 Learning English can seem overwhelming, especially when you consider that there are over 170,000 words in English. However, the good news is that if you can learn the most frequent 1000 word families, then you can understand more than 80% of everyday spoken English. This means you'll be able to communicate with native English speakers and understand most of what they say.

But I didn't say 'words' there, did I? I said 'word families', and you might be wondering, "What is a word family?". I'll tell you. A word family is a group of words that share a common base, which we can add to in order to create new
18:00 words. So, let's look at an example to make that easier to understand. The word, 'nation', has 26 family members, okay? It's a base word with 26 related

words. So, 'nation' has 'national', 'international', and 'nationality', okay? These make up a word family. So, understanding 1000 of those would mean you're actually learning 4119 words. If you can learn all of those words, then you will understand more than 80% of what natives say every day.

Learning over 4000 words sounds a bit scary but I'm going to make things a little less scary for you. We have these things called 'affixes'. Affixes are these little parts we put before or after a word to change its meaning. You probably already know some of them, like '-ed' or '-ing' added to the end of a verb can change its
19:00 tense. But did you know that the 'inter-' in 'international' means 'among' or 'between'? And now you know that, maybe you can guess that 'internet' means 'between networks'. Okay, so just by learning affixes, you'll be able to understand many English words without having to memorise them.

To be proficient in English, you need to know a certain number of words. And according to the Oxford English Dictionary, there are about 171,146 words in English, and that doesn't count the 47,156 words that we don't use anymore but you might find in old books. However, the 1000 most frequent word families in English cover more than 82% of everything written and said. The next 1000 is
20:00 just over 7%; and then the next, 3%; then the next, 2%; the next, 1%; and so on. This means that the more common a word is, the more important it is to know, of course. For example, it's much more important to know the word 'house' than the word 'abode', because 'house' is used more frequently in English.

So how many word families do you need to know to do different things in English? At 1000, as you know, you'll be able manage 80% of everyday native

conversation. At 3000, you'll be able to understand most films and television. At 8 or 9000, you'll be able to read newspapers and novels. And at 10,000 you'll be considered fluent or native-like. But to get to the same level as the average adult English native speaker, you'll need 15,000 to 20,000. And for university educated
21:00 natives, that number is even higher.

Of course, knowing a word is more than just recognising it. To truly know a word, you need to understand how it's written, how it's pronounced, any word parts or affixes it has, what it means, and how to use it in context. You'll also need to know other words that are associated with it, any grammar rules or collocations it has, and any constraints on its usage, like, is it formal or can you say it in front of your parents? It may seem like a lot but it's not impossible to learn all this information. And, in fact, there are plenty of words you already know all of this for. After all, you're listening to a podcast aimed at mid-level English learners.

To learn a new word, you need to notice it five and sixteen times. If you're
22:00 actively studying English, you can usually learn a word after noticing five times. But, if you're learning incidentally though TV or casual conversation, it can take up to sixteen times to learn the same word. But don't worry, there are plenty of opportunities to notice new words in everyday life. For example, a 40-minute TV show has about 5200 words, and quite a lot of those words are the same. This podcast episode has over 3000 words, but you've heard the words 'frequent', 'affix', and 'phoneme' several times. So, you can start noticing new words quickly without too much effort.

So, to find out how many words you know, you can take a test by Paul Nation. He's a highly respected linguistics professor and those of you taking the Podcast Course have already taken the test. But, if you aren't following the course, you can click the link in the transcript or in the description.

23:00 So, how many word families do you know? Don't be too hard on yourself if the number is low. Learning a language is a journey, not a destination, right? And every step counts. With practice and patience, you'll get there.

IN CONCLUSION

To sum up, English can be a challenging language full of quirks and exceptions. The exceptions in spelling, pronunciation, and grammar often leave learners feeling overwhelmed and frustrated. However, it's important to remember that mastering English is still possible. And if you practice and don't give up, you'll get there.

In fact, many native English speakers also struggle with the quirks of their own language, so it's common to find challenges even for an advanced learner.

My advice is to be patient. Making mistakes is a natural and important part of the learning process. Think about your own language: you weren't perfect when you
24:00 were a small child. It took time. And English is the same. It will come with time and with effort.

Read books, watch movies, and listen to music and podcasts to help you understand the patterns and quirks over time. In fact, embracing the quirks of English can be a fun and rewarding part of the learning process. Whether it's mastering irregular verbs, or learning the subtleties of phrasal verbs, or fully understanding idioms and expressions, there's always something new to discover and explore in English, even for natives.

So don't worry about the challenges you might face. With hard work and a positive attitude, you can continue to make progress and become a fluent and confident English speaker.

Now, before we finish, let's take a look at some key phrases that I used in this episode.

25:00

Firstly, I used the phrase 'weird and wonderful' to describe some interesting and unusual things in English. 'Weird and wonderful' is commonly used to talk about something that is both strange and interesting.

I also said that the letter C doesn't have anything unique about it in English. Before I said any more about that point, I asked you to 'hear me out'. And that's the phrase, 'hear me out'. It's used to ask someone to listen closely before they agree, disagree, or make another judgment. You want them to listen to what you have to say, process it, and then make their judgment. Let them have all the information.

Later, I used the expression, ‘don’t get me started’ when I talked about the sound /ʃ/. ‘Don’t get me started’ is used to show that the speaker has strong feelings or opinions about a topic and could talk about the topic for a long time. ‘Don’t get me started’.

26:00

I used the word ‘basically’ in a sentence to explain that, in Italian, it is usually possible to correctly pronounce any word simply by reading it. Although there are exceptions, I didn’t feel the need to talk about them. By using the word ‘basically’, I’m saying that I’m just giving a simple explanation of the idea.

If you would like more vocabulary practice, to learn how to make an effective argument, or get more familiar with the IPA, make sure you that are following along with The Podcast Course. As always, the course is free for my Serious and Dedicated learners. Link is in the description.

And lastly, before I go, I would love to give a big shout out to my dedicated students. That's Anzu Takakura and Jean Nxumalo. Thank you so much for your support.

Sources:

“The ‘I before e, except after c’ rule is a giant lie” by Christopher Ingraham

“How many words do you need to speak a language?” by Beth-Sagar-Fenton and Lizzy McNeill

“Depth of Knowledge” by Paul Nation (2001)