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## English Learning for Curious Minds



Member-only content Transcript \& Key Vocabulary

# English Learning for Curious Minds | BONUS Episode \#003 

Let's Talk About Vocabulary // How To Learn Vocabulary In English

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# Bonus Episode \#003 <br> Let's Talk About Vocabulary // How To Learn Vocabulary In English <br> March 13, 2020 

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[00:00:04] Hello, hello, hello, and welcome to another members-only English Learning for Curious Minds podcast.
[00:00:11] Firstly, thank you for your ongoing ${ }^{\underline{1}}$ membership.
[00:00:15] It couldn't be possible without you and I really am truly grateful.
[00:00:20] Today we are going to be talking about vocabulary in English.
[00:00:25] When focusing on vocabulary is important, when it's not so important.
[00:00:31] We'll talk about some of the myths $^{2}$ around vocabulary and we'll talk about some of the techniques that you can use to help build up your vocabulary.

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[00:00:43] For starters³³ , as you may know, like you, I'm also a language learner.
[00:00:49] Aside from my mother tongue English, I've learned Italian, French, Chinese, Russian, and Spanish, but to very different levels.
[00:01:00] The order I just gave was actually the order of how well I speak those languages - I speak Italian with my wife, but I'm only just starting Spanish and would probably sound like a small child.
[00:01:14] And I'm definitely not anything special.
[00:01:17] I have the same issues as anyone with motivation ${ }^{4}$, with remembering words, with making mistakes.
[00:01:26] So what I'm going to share with you today is my perspective ${ }^{5}$ on this, coming at ${ }^{6}$ it from a perspective I guess very much like yours.
[00:01:38] Too often you see stuff on the internet which is mainly from people whose entire lives are taken up by learning languages who are teaching you things that would only apply if you speak 10 languages.

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[00:01:54] It's really not very helpful for people who aren't making a career of learning just dozens of languages.
[00:02:02] So today we are going to approach it from a normal person's point of view.
[00:02:08] Firstly, what is vocabulary and why building up your vocabulary is important.
[00:02:15] This might sound ridiculously ${ }^{\text {¹ }}$ obvious, but let's just define vocabulary.
[00:02:21] Vocabulary is the body $^{8}$ of words used in a particular language.
[00:02:26] It's the words that make up a language.
[00:02:28] It's the bricks with which language is built.
[00:02:33] And in English, like in almost every language, there are an awful lot ${ }^{-9}$ of bricks, a lot of words.
[00:02:43] In a project between Harvard university and Google in 2010, they looked at a large collection of digitized books, and estimated that they were $1,022,000$ words in English, and that the number of words would continue to grow by several thousand every year.

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[00:03:09] This number includes all the different forms of the word though, plus a load of archaic, very old words, which aren't in use anymore.
[00:03:22] If we reduce this down to just word forms, so that means you don't count verb conjugations ${ }^{10}$, plurals and so on, there are still around 600,000 different words in the Oxford English dictionary.
[00:03:39] But of course, this dictionary uses loads of words that aren't currently in use.
[00:03:45] You might say that a more useful number would be 171,476 which is the number of words that are currently in use according to the Oxford English dictionary.
[00:04:00] But that's still a huge amount, and most native speakers evidently don't have a vocabulary that's nearly as large as that.
[00:04:11] It's estimated that most adult native English speakers have a vocabulary of between 20-35,000 words.
[00:04:22] That's of course a big variation and the type of vocabulary that you have, both in terms of the number of words that you know and the types of words that you know will vary ${ }^{\underline{11}}$ according to things like the job that you do, your education level, your interests, and so on.

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 has a keen interest ${ }^{\underline{13}}$ in pigeons, let's say, won't.
[00:04:53] And of course vice-versa, unless that neurosurgeon also has a keen interest in pigeons.
[00:05:01] So even if we take this lower number, the 20,000 words, that's still a very large amount of words, right?
[00:05:10] If you set ${ }^{\underline{14}}$ yourself the task of learning 10 new words a day, and you started from scratch ${ }^{\underline{15}}$, it would take you almost six years to get there.
[00:05:21] And if you already have a vocabulary of, let's say 3000 words, which is the number in the Oxford 3000, the 3000 most important words to know in English, according to the Oxford English dictionary, then getting to a native speaker level of 20,000 if you learnt 25 new words a day would take you almost two years.
[00:05:46] And that's assuming that you don't forget any of those words, which I'm sure you'll agree, is a bit optimistic ${ }^{\frac{16}{16}}$.

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[00:05:53] What I'd recommend, however, is to stop worrying about how many words you know or don't know, to actually embrace ${ }^{17}$ it when you don't understand a word.
[00:06:07] We'll talk about some of the strategies that you can use to figure out what a word means and remember it even if you've never heard it before.
[00:06:19] To start though, I just want to talk about a few myths which are pretty common with people learning English and are really not very helpful when you're trying to learn.
[00:06:33] Our first myth is that the more words you know, the better you are at English.
[00:06:40] Of course, there is often a correlation ${ }^{\frac{18}{}{ }^{-1} \text {, people who have a higher level of }}$ English tend to ${ }^{19}$ have a better vocabulary.
[00:06:50] But just knowing vocabulary does not make you a better English speaker.
[00:06:56] As we know words are just the bricks with which language is formed.
[00:07:02] If you don't know how to put these bricks together, then it doesn't matter how many you have.

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[00:07:08] The best you can do, if we are to continue the analogy $\underline{20}^{20}$, is to build a massive pile ${ }^{2 \underline{1}}$ of bricks.
[00:07:18] An example of this is in 2015, the person who won the world championship of the word game Scrabble ${ }^{2 \underline{22}}$ in French was actually a New Zealander, a person from New Zealand.
[00:07:35] And no, he wasn't someone who was brought up bilingually ${ }^{\underline{23}}$ or had spent decades working as a professor at the Sorbonne university in Paris.
[00:07:46] He doesn't actually speak French at all.
[00:07:49] He had just memorised the French dictionary in apparently nine weeks.
[00:07:56] He knew all of the words, he just didn't have a clue ${ }^{24}$ what they meant or how to put them together.
[00:08:03] So vocabulary alone, obviously, isn't enough.

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[00:08:08] Yes, it's important to continue to make sure you are increasing the amount of words in your arsenal ${ }^{25}$, that you are able to use, both from a comprehension point of view and from a production point of view - so by that, that's words that you can both recognise when someone else says them, but that you can also use in conversation yourself without having heard them first.
[00:08:35] But more important is to be able to use these words in context.
[00:08:41] You'll sound a lot more confident and a lot more fluent if you're using English in a way that's clear, easy to understand, and free from errors instead of using sentences that are full of unusual words, but peppered with ${ }^{-\frac{26}{}}$ basic errors.
[00:09:02] This brings us on to our second myth, which is that the best way to learn vocabulary is through memorising vocabulary lists.
[00:09:12] I should just preface ${ }^{27}$ this by saying that an even more important rule is that you should do what works for you.
[00:09:20] And for some people, vocabulary lists work, but not for most.

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[00:09:25] The best way to learn vocabulary in almost every case, is through exposure ${ }^{28}$ to English, so you are learning in context.
[00:09:36] There are a $\underline{\text { myriad }}^{\underline{29}}$ of ways to do this, so many different ways - reading, speaking with people, podcasts, of course.
[00:09:45] What people don't do, what most people don't do at least, is to read or listen actively.
[00:09:53] Instead, they just allow new pieces of vocabulary to sort of drift over ${ }^{30}$ them.
[00:10:01] It's completely natural that when you're listening to a podcast, watching a film, speaking with a native speaker, you don't always want to have to press pause or ask your friend to stop speaking in order for you to find out what that word means or clarify ${ }^{31}$ its definition.
[00:10:22] So it's important to use resources that are appropriate to your level, of course.
[00:10:28] This podcast is aimed at people who are intermediate and above.

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[00:10:33] If you're a beginner, evidently you'd have to press pause a lot and it would be pretty disruptive ${ }^{32}$.
[00:10:41] And research suggests that you should aim for material where the ratio ${ }^{33}$ of new words to words that you know is about between 1:20 to 1:50.
[00:10:53] So you should understand most of the words and be able to learn new words in context.
[00:11:01] Why is learning in context better?
[00:11:04] Well, it provides you with information on how the word is actually used, not just the theory of how it could be used.
[00:11:16] English is a particularly tricky ${ }^{34}$ language, as there are lots of words that have multiple meanings.
[00:11:24] For example, the word 'set' in English - S E T - I guess you might say that you know what this means, right?
[00:11:32] You know what 'set' means?

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[00:11:34] You probably know some of its meanings, but I'd imagine that you won't know all of them.
[00:11:41] I definitely couldn't list all of them, and most native speakers couldn't.
[00:11:47] Why?
[00:11:48] Well, set has a total of 430 different meanings.
[00:11:54] You're not going to learn that by memorising ${ }^{35}$ a vocabulary list or through flashcards.
[00:12:01] It's just not an effective way to do so.
[00:12:04] And it would also be really boring.
[00:12:07] Our third myth, which is one that language schools are particularly guilty of peddling ${ }^{36}$, of pushing, is that you need to get a certain number of words in your vocabulary in order to be able to communicate at certain levels or do certain things.
[00:12:27] You need $X$ thousand words to work in an office, an extra $X$ thousand to get into an English speaking university and so on.

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[00:12:38] Yes, these might be useful guides and they are certainly useful for schools that want to sell courses, but as we heard from myth number one, if you don't know how to use these words in context, you may as well not know them.
[00:12:55] Someone with a vocabulary of just 3000 words might sound like a much more accomplished ${ }^{37}$ speaker than someone with 6,000 words, if they used their vocabulary, their words, thoughtfully, and asked for clarification ${ }^{38}$ when they didn't understand, as opposed to someone who just used words in the wrong context.
[00:13:22] And our final myth, which actually leads us onto our next point, is that there are hacks ${ }^{39}$ to master vocabulary, hacks, shortcuts, tricks.
[00:13:34] I cringe ${ }^{40}$, I feel terrible, when I see things like 'follow my seven tips to master English vocabulary in three weeks', or people who are selling false hope, and are promising completely unrealistic results.
[00:13:50] Instead of hacks and shortcuts, the way to think about learning vocabulary is through solid foundations $\underline{\underline{41}}^{\underline{1}}$, things that you can start doing today that will help you build up your vocabulary over the weeks and months to come.

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[00:14:08] And the nice thing about this is that it compounds른, meaning that vocabulary you learn today will help you learn more and more vocabulary in the future.
[00:14:21] And from a motivational ${ }^{43}$ point of view, it's pretty demotivating ${ }^{44}$ to constantly have to stop to look up words.
[00:14:29] The more your vocabulary expands, the more enjoyable it will be to read books or articles, to listen to podcasts or to watch films in English, which will mean you'll do it more and you'll learn faster.
[00:14:46] So, without further ado ${ }^{45}$, what are some of the things that you can do to try to help build up your vocabulary?
[00:14:55] Firstly, and this is hardly revolutionary, but it's always worth saying, it's to consume as much original content as possible in English.
[00:15:06] Whether that's reading podcasts like this, films, the more you are exposed to English, the more your vocabulary will grow.

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[00:15:17] You should aim for things where you can understand at least $80 \%$ and then it won't be a huge chore ${ }^{46}$, it won't be super frustrating because you should be able to still enjoy it, even if you don't understand every word.
[00:15:33] And what should you do when you don't understand a word.
[00:15:37] Of course, if you can understand it through context, great, if you can wait a little bit and figure out what it means, fantastic.
[00:15:46] If you need to look it up either in a dictionary or in a vocabulary list like the ones that we give for these podcasts, then do that too.
[00:15:57] But don't just find the definition there and then ${ }^{47}$, and do nothing other than solve your immediate comprehension ${ }^{48}$ problem.
[00:16:07] For the vast majority ${ }^{49}$ of people, and I'm definitely in this category, you will forget it unless you continue to encounter ${ }^{50}$ it, unless you continue to see the word over the coming days and weeks.
[00:16:22] Whether this is through flashcards, through keeping your own little vocabulary book, through writing Post It notes on your bathroom mirror, through

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something called the gold list method or any other technique, the important thing is that you're doing something that means you are likely to re-encounter ${ }^{\underline{51}}$ that word, to come across it again.
[00:16:45] You may call me old fashioned here, but for me nothing beats ${ }^{\text {52 }}$ a little notebook that you can carry around with you.
[00:16:53] I wish I had a photographic memory, but I don't, and I guess that you probably don't either.
[00:17:01] Our next technique, and this is really an extension ${ }^{\underline{53}}$ of our first technique, is to practice using your new pieces of vocabulary whenever you can.
[00:17:12] If you're lucky enough to have people that you can practice English with face to face, great.
[00:17:17] Make sure that you use that new word or phrase with them.
[00:17:23] And if you don't have that chance, well, then you can write down different uses of that word in context.
[00:17:30] The more you use it, the more you are likely to remember it.

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[00:17:35] Then there are other more technical skills that we're not going to go into huge depth on today, such as to work on your ability to recognise word routes, prefixes ${ }^{54}$, and suffixes ${ }^{55}$.
[00:17:50] And obviously a knowledge of things like Latin and Greek come in handy ${ }^{56}$ here.
[00:17:55] Things like words with 'pan' in it, right 'pan', they probably refer to the concept of something being wide or far reaching ${ }^{57}$.

[00:18:08] For a word, starting with 'ab', AB or 'a' means, it probably means the opposite of what the rest of the word means.
[00:18:18] So abnormal ${ }^{60}$, amoral ${ }^{61}$, and so on.

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[00:18:23] And I just have two more tips, which might sound like they are completely in opposition to each other, but they really aren't.
[00:18:33] The first one again might sound obvious and it's to concentrate on words and vocabulary that are actually relevant to you to how you need to use English.
[00:18:46] Don't concern yourself with vocabulary that you are likely never going to encounter as it just simply doesn't matter.
[00:18:57] And the final one is to always try to use an unusual word, even when you know the usual one.
[00:19:06] As an exercise, trying to avoid saying the word 'good' and try to say instead great, fantastic, splendid, excellent, marvelous, superb, wonderful, you get the gist ${ }^{62}$.
[00:19:22] Working on your vocabulary isn't just useful, It can also be a lot of fun.
[00:19:27] I don't know about you, but when I suddenly remember a really obscure ${ }^{63}$ word or I try to use an obscure word when I'm speaking a foreign language, it brings me a huge amount of joy.

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[00:19:41] For example, just the other day, I needed to say the word for seesaw ${ }^{64}$ in Italian.
[00:19:48] If you don't know what a seesaw ${ }^{65}$ is, it's the children's toy you might find in a playground where one child sits on either end and they bounce up and down.
[00:20:00] Anyway, I knew the word as 'zittolo zottolo'.
[00:20:05] In fact, this is actually a really old expression from Trieste in Northeastern Italy
[00:20:13] The actual Italian word is 'Altalena', which is the same as the word for swing.
[00:20:20] The point is that even though this word was completely useless anywhere outside a city in Northeastern Italy, it made me really happy that I'd actually remembered it and put a huge smile on my face.
[00:20:35] And that's the real joy of language learning.
[00:20:38] Yes, it's great to be able to communicate and yes, you should be practical.
[00:20:43] But sometimes it's these magical moments that really make you happy, even if the next day you forget the word for something super easy.

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[00:20:53] So yes, focus on vocabulary that is relevant for you, but also sometimes rejoice ${ }^{66}$ in the magic of completely pointless ${ }^{67}$ words.
[00:21:05] Okay then that is it for this little episode on vocabulary in English.
[00:21:10] I hope it has been interesting, and that, if it didn't teach you anything new, at least it helped solidify $\underline{\underline{6}}^{68}$ some ideas and theories that we all sort of know, but that it's useful to have someone remind us from time to time.
[00:21:25] I'm Alastair Budge and you've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English.
[00:21:31] I'll catch you in the next episode.
[END OF PODCAST]

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## Key vocabulary

| Word | Definition |
| :--- | :--- |
| Ongoing | continuing to exist or develop, or happening at the present moment |
| Myth | a commonly believed but false idea |
| For starters | enthusiasm for doing something |
| Motivation | a particular way of considering something something is the first in a list of things |
| Perspective | approaching, talking about |
| Coming at | in a way that is stupid or unreasonable and deserves to be laughed at |
| Awful | a large amount of something large amount |

Archaic of or belonging to an ancient period in history, very old
Conjugations a group of verbs that conjugate in the same way
Vary $\quad$ if things of the same type vary, they are different from each other, and if
youry them, you cause them to be different from each other
Neurosurgeon $\quad$ a doctor who performs operations involving the brain or nerves


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| Keen interest | a high level of interest |
| :---: | :---: |
| Set | give, assign |
| From scratch | from the beginning, without using anything that already exists |
| Optimistic | the quality of being full of hope and emphasizing the good parts of a situation, or a belief that something good will happen |
| Embrace | to accept something enthusiastically |
| Correlation | a connection or relationship between two or more facts, numbers, etc. |
| Tend to | to be likely to behave in a particular way or have a particular characteristic |
| Analogy | a comparison between things that have similar features, often used to help explain a principle or idea |
| Pile | objects positioned one on top of another |
| Scrabble | a brand name for a game played on a board covered in squares in which players win points by creating words from letters with different values and connecting these words with ones already on the board |
| Bilingually | speaking two languages |
| Didn't have a | had no idea |


| Arsenal | a building where weapons and military equipment are stored |
| :---: | :---: |
| Peppered with | filled with |
| Preface | if you preface your words or actions with something else, you say or do this other thing first |
| Exposure | the fact of experiencing something or being affected by it because of being in a particular situation or place |
| Myriad | a very large number of something |
| Drift over | to pass over without being properly absorbed or processed |
| Clarify | to make something clear or easier to understand by giving more details or a simpler explanation |
| Disruptive | causing trouble and therefore stopping something from continuing as usual |
| Ratio | the relationship between two groups or amounts that expresses how much bigger one is than the other |
| Tricky | if a piece of work or problem is tricky, it is difficult to deal with and needs careful attention or skill |
| Memorising | to learn something so that you will remember it exactly |
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| Peddling | to sell things, especially by taking them to different places |
| :---: | :---: |
| Accomplished | skilled |
| Clarification | see 'clarify' |
| Hacks | a shortcut, a good solution or piece of advice |
| Cringe | to feel very embarrassed |
| Foundations | the structures below the surface of the ground that support a building |
| Compounds | if something compounds, the benefits increase over time |
| Motivational | giving you motivation (= enthusiasm) |
| Demotivating | making someone less enthusiastic about a job or task |
| Without further ado | without wasting more time |
| Chore | a job or piece of work that is often boring or unpleasant but needs to be done regularly |
| There and then | immediately |
| Comprehension | understanding |
| Vast majority | almost everyone |
| Encounter | to meet |
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| Re-encounter | to meet again |
| :---: | :---: |
| Beats | is better than |
| Extension | the act of adding to something in order to make it bigger or longer |
| Prefixes | a letter or group of letters added to the beginning of a word to make a |
|  | new word |
| Suffixes | a letter or group of letters added at the end of a word to make a new word |
| Come in handy | is useful |
| Far reaching | something far-reaching has a great influence on many people or things |
| Panorama | a view of a wide area |
| Pandemic | (of a disease) existing in almost all of an area or in almost all of a group of people, animals, or plants |
| Abnormal | different from what is usual or average, especially in a way that is bad |
| Amoral | without moral principles |
| Get the gist | understand the meaning |
| Obscure | not known to many people |
| Seesaw | a long board that children play on. The board is balanced on a central point so that when a child sits on each end they can make the board go up |
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and down by pushing off the ground with their feet.

Swing

Rejoice

Pointless
something that is pointless has no purpose, and it is a waste of time doing it

Solidify
to become or make something become certain

We'd love to get your feedback on this podcast.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

You can email us at hi@leonardoenglish.com.


[^0]:    ${ }^{1}$ continuing to exist or develop, or happening at the present moment
    ${ }^{2}$ a commonly believed but false idea
    

[^1]:    ${ }^{3}$ used to say that something is the first in a list of things
    ${ }^{4}$ enthusiasm for doing something
    ${ }^{5}$ a particular way of considering something
    ${ }^{6}$ approaching, talking about
    

[^2]:    ${ }^{7}$ in a way that is stupid or unreasonable and deserves to be laughed at
    ${ }^{8}$ a large amount of something
    ${ }^{9}$ a very large amount
    

[^3]:    ${ }^{10}$ a group of verbs that conjugate in the same way
    ${ }^{11}$ if things of the same type vary, they are different from each other, and if you vary them, you cause them to be different from each other
    

[^4]:    ${ }^{12}$ a doctor who performs operations involving the brain or nerves
    ${ }^{13}$ a high level of interest
    ${ }^{14}$ give, assign
    ${ }^{15}$ from the beginning, without using anything that already exists
    ${ }^{16}$ the quality of being full of hope and emphasizing the good parts of a situation, or a belief that something good will happen
    

[^5]:    ${ }^{17}$ to accept something enthusiastically
    ${ }^{18}$ a connection or relationship between two or more facts, numbers, etc.
    ${ }^{19}$ to be likely to behave in a particular way or have a particular characteristic
    

[^6]:    ${ }^{20}$ a comparison between things that have similar features, often used to help explain a principle or idea
    ${ }^{21}$ objects positioned one on top of another
    ${ }^{22}$ a brand name for a game played on a board covered in squares in which players win points by creating words from letters with different values and connecting these words with ones already on the board
    ${ }^{23}$ speaking two languages
    ${ }^{24}$ had no idea
    

[^7]:    ${ }^{25}$ a building where weapons and military equipment are stored
    ${ }^{26}$ filled with
    ${ }^{27}$ if you preface your words or actions with something else, you say or do this other thing first
    

[^8]:    ${ }^{28}$ the fact of experiencing something or being affected by it because of being in a particular situation or place
    ${ }^{29}$ a very large number of something
    ${ }^{30}$ to pass over without being properly absorbed or processed
    ${ }^{31}$ to make something clear or easier to understand by giving more details or a simpler explanation
    

[^9]:    ${ }^{32}$ causing trouble and therefore stopping something from continuing as usual
    ${ }^{33}$ the relationship between two groups or amounts that expresses how much bigger one is than the other
    ${ }^{34}$ if a piece of work or problem is tricky, it is difficult to deal with and needs careful attention or skill
    

[^10]:    ${ }^{35}$ to learn something so that you will remember it exactly
    ${ }^{36}$ to sell things, especially by taking them to different places
    

[^11]:    ${ }^{37}$ skilled
    ${ }^{38}$ see 'clarify'
    ${ }^{39}$ a shortcut, a good solution or piece of advice
    ${ }^{40}$ to feel very embarrassed
    ${ }^{41}$ the structures below the surface of the ground that support a building
    

[^12]:    ${ }^{42}$ if something compounds, the benefits increase over time
    ${ }^{43}$ giving you motivation (= enthusiasm)
    ${ }^{44}$ making someone less enthusiastic about a job or task
    ${ }^{45}$ without wasting more time
    

[^13]:    ${ }^{46}$ a job or piece of work that is often boring or unpleasant but needs to be done regularly
    ${ }^{47}$ immediately
    ${ }^{48}$ understanding
    ${ }^{49}$ almost everyone
    ${ }^{50}$ to meet
    

[^14]:    ${ }^{51}$ to meet again
    ${ }^{52}$ is better than
    ${ }^{53}$ the act of adding to something in order to make it bigger or longer
    

[^15]:    ${ }^{54}$ a letter or group of letters added to the beginning of a word to make a new word
    ${ }^{55}$ a letter or group of letters added at the end of a word to make a new word
    ${ }^{56}$ is useful
    ${ }^{57}$ something far-reaching has a great influence on many people or things
    ${ }^{58}$ a view of a wide area
    ${ }^{59}$ (of a disease) existing in almost all of an area or in almost all of a group of people, animals, or plants
    ${ }^{60}$ different from what is usual or average, especially in a way that is bad
    ${ }^{61}$ without moral principles
    

[^16]:    ${ }^{62}$ understand the meaning
    ${ }^{63}$ not known to many people
    

[^17]:    ${ }^{64}$ a long board that children play on. The board is balanced on a central point so that when a child sits on each end they can make the board go up and down by pushing off the ground with their feet.
    ${ }^{65}$ a seat joined by two ropes or chains to a metal bar or a tree, on which you can sit and move backwards and forwards
    

[^18]:    ${ }^{66}$ to feel or show great happiness about something
    ${ }^{67}$ something that is pointless has no purpose, and it is a waste of time doing it
    ${ }^{68}$ to become or make something become certain
    

