

# ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS





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**Episode #048**  
**The Spanish Flu**  
**April 28, 2020**

[00:00:04] Hello, hello, hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English, the show where you can listen to fascinating stories and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:23] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about The Spanish Flu.

[00:00:30] It is by some measures, the world's most devastating pandemic.

[00:00:35] And of course, knowing a bit more about it is helpful for understanding some of the ways in which we might think about what's going on in the world today.

[00:00:48] As we will talk about, there are lots of similarities, but also lots of reasons that we shouldn't pay too much attention to what happened during The Spanish Flu.

## The Spanish Flu

[00:01:02] In any case, it is a fascinating story and I'm pretty excited to share this episode with you.

[00:01:11] Before we get started though, I just wanted to quickly remind you that you can get a copy of the transcript and key vocabulary for this episode over on the website, which is [Leonardoenglish.com](http://leonardoenglish.com).

[00:01:24] The transcript is super helpful for following along and the key vocabulary, well, it means that you won't need to pause to look up words and you will build up your vocabulary much more quickly than you would just by listening.

[00:01:40] So if that sounds [right up your street](#)<sup>1</sup>, then head to [Leonardoenglish.com](http://leonardoenglish.com).

[00:01:48] Okay then, The Spanish Flu.

[00:01:52] Until earlier on this year, The Spanish Flu was something that was [somewhat](#)<sup>2</sup> [fading from memory](#)<sup>3</sup>, something that you may have heard about, may have read about, but you probably didn't have much of an understanding of what actually happened.

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<sup>1</sup> to be the type of thing that you are interested in or that you enjoy doing

<sup>2</sup> to some degree

<sup>3</sup> becoming forgotten

## The Spanish Flu

[00:02:14] But then of course the world changed and people were [scrambling](#)<sup>4</sup> for their history books to see if there were any lessons from the past that could help us [confront](#)<sup>5</sup> the situation we are now in.

[00:02:30] So let's just start by reminding ourselves of what actually happened.

[00:02:38] As we know, in 1914 the First World War broke out in Europe and by 1918 much of the world had been [dragged](#)<sup>6</sup> into a nasty and [fruitless](#)<sup>7</sup> war.

[00:02:53] Large parts of Europe were [devastated](#)<sup>8</sup> and countries and their people were [worn down](#)<sup>9</sup>, both physically and mentally, by a war that had [dragged](#) on for far longer than anyone had thought.

[00:03:11] Then in 1918 a strange flu started appearing and people started getting ill and dying at [rates](#)<sup>10</sup> that had never previously been seen with the normal flu.

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<sup>4</sup> to move or climb quickly but with difficulty, often using your hands to help you

<sup>5</sup> to face, meet, or deal with a difficult situation or person

<sup>6</sup> pulled

<sup>7</sup> If an action or attempt to do something is fruitless, it is unsuccessful or produces nothing of value

<sup>8</sup> completely destroyed

<sup>9</sup> to make someone tired

<sup>10</sup> the speed at which something happens or changes, or the amount or number of times it happens or changes in a particular period

## The Spanish Flu

[00:03:28] There had been strange cases of a flu even earlier, actually, as early as 1916 but it wasn't until 1918 that this new flu really became known and started spreading across the world.

[00:03:49] And over the course of the next year and a half or so, it [ravaged](#)<sup>11</sup> the world.

[00:03:56] Around 500 million people, half a billion people, got it.

[00:04:03] We will never know exactly how many people died from it, but estimates [range](#)<sup>12</sup> from 25 million to a hundred million people.

[00:04:15] And it lowered the average life expectancy in the United States by more than 12 years.

[00:04:24] It's still not quite clear though exactly where The Spanish Flu started, but we know one thing that may just surprise you and that is that it definitely wasn't Spain.

[00:04:39] The reason that it was referred to as 'The Spanish Flu' was because the Spanish newspapers were the first to report cases of it, the first cases were reported in Spain.

[00:04:54] And it wasn't because the Spanish journalists were particularly fast or Spanish doctors were the first to [diagnose](#)<sup>13</sup> it.

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<sup>11</sup> to cause great damage to something

<sup>12</sup> to have an upper and a lower limit in amount, number, etc.

<sup>13</sup> to recognise and name the exact character of a disease or a problem, by examining it

## The Spanish Flu

[00:05:04] It was because Spain was **neutral**<sup>14</sup> during World War One.

[00:05:09] And because of its **neutrality**<sup>15</sup>, its press, its newspapers were free to publish whatever stories they wanted.

[00:05:20] When there were the first cases in the US, in France, in Britain, and in Germany, these countries were still right in the middle of war.

[00:05:31] It was important for **morale**<sup>16</sup> to be kept up and there was the fear that if it became known that there was another enemy to fight, another dangerous virus that was killing troops, then this could be really **detrimental**<sup>17</sup> for the morale of the troops and also the morale back home.

[00:05:55] So for quite a while it was kept quiet.

[00:05:58] The Spanish were the only ones to report it because they were neutral and didn't have to worry so much about morale.

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<sup>14</sup> not saying or doing anything that would encourage or help any of the groups involved in an argument or war

<sup>15</sup> a neutral position, especially in a war

<sup>16</sup> the amount of confidence felt by a person or group of people, especially when in a dangerous or difficult situation

<sup>17</sup> causing harm or damage

## The Spanish Flu

[00:06:08] There are all sorts of theories about where the virus actually came from, but the evidence for any of them isn't actually strong enough for us to spend too much time talking about today.

[00:06:23] What is interesting though, and we can of course, draw the parallels between then and now, is what people thought was causing it, where they thought it came from.

[00:06:36] Remember the world had just experienced the First World War, the first [conflict](#)<sup>18</sup> that involved such a large number of different countries and a [scale](#)<sup>19</sup> of death that hadn't really ever been seen before.

[00:06:54] Those of you who remember the episode on the poets of World War One will remember some of the ways in which young British soldiers talked about their experience.

[00:07:07] [Trench](#)<sup>20</sup> warfare, poison gas, tanks, [barbed wire](#)<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> war

<sup>19</sup> level, amount

<sup>20</sup> a narrow hole that is dug into the ground

<sup>21</sup> a type of strong wire with sharp points on it, used to prevent people or animals from entering or leaving a place , especially a field

## The Spanish Flu

[00:07:13] It was a new kind of war, and there was quite a strong belief that The Spanish Flu, this new influenza that had never been seen in anyone's living memory was a sort of [divine](#)<sup>22</sup> punishment for what the world had done.

[00:07:31] There was also the theory, which is perhaps slightly more [credible](#)<sup>23</sup>, or at least based more in the real than the [divine](#), that the influenza had been caused by poisonous gases coming from the battlefields in Northern France.

[00:07:53] Well, neither of these was true.

[00:07:57] We understand The Spanish Flu a bit better now, and we now know that it comes from the same [strain](#)<sup>24</sup> of virus, the same family of virus as avian flu, H1N1, the swine flu that we saw in 2009, ninety years later.

[00:08:17] So what did The Spanish Flu do?

[00:08:23] Well, I think we know [broadly](#)<sup>25</sup> the story of that.

[00:08:26] It spread incredibly quickly and infected up to 500 million people, a third of the world's population at the time, and killed up to 100 million people.

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<sup>22</sup> connected with a god, or like a god

<sup>23</sup> able to be believed or trusted

<sup>24</sup> an animal or plant from a particular group whose characteristics are different in some way from others of the same group

<sup>25</sup> in a general way, without considering specific examples or all the details



## The Spanish Flu

[00:08:40] On one level, it's quite crazy to think that it spread so quickly and so widely given that the world was significantly less connected than it is now.

[00:08:53] The main theory about why it was able to spread so quickly was that it was spread by soldiers.

[00:09:01] Soldiers were always in pretty [close proximity](#)<sup>26</sup>, they were close to one another, whether that was actually in the [trenches](#) or in the [barracks](#)<sup>27</sup>, it didn't really matter.

[00:09:14] They lived in close [confinement](#)<sup>28</sup>, and this meant that the virus spread very easily from soldier to soldier.

[00:09:25] Indeed, one of the first times that the virus was actually reported was in an army camp in Kansas in the United States.

[00:09:37] In this camp, there were around 50,000 soldiers who were waiting to be shipped to Europe to fight.

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<sup>26</sup> close to one another

<sup>27</sup> a building or group of buildings where soldiers live

<sup>28</sup> the situation in which a person or animal is kept somewhere, usually by force

## The Spanish Flu

[00:09:46] Early one morning in March, 1918, a soldier reported himself to the army doctor with an influenza, and by lunchtime, the very same day the army hospital was completely [overflowing](#)<sup>29</sup> with infected soldiers.

[00:10:07] And soldiers were really the only people who were actually traveling at the time.

[00:10:15] On one level this just means that they are the ones who would be sent to different places taking the virus with them.

[00:10:24] But it's actually more interesting than this.

[00:10:27] One of the main theories about why The Spanish Flu was so much worse than other influenzas was precisely because of the way in which soldiers were dealt with and how the flu virus normally [mutates](#)<sup>30</sup>, how it changes.

[00:10:47] So, as you may be aware, a virus typically [mutates](#), it changes as it is passed from person to person.

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<sup>29</sup> When a liquid overflows, it flows over the edges of a container, etc. because there is too much of it

<sup>30</sup> to change from one thing or type of thing into another

## The Spanish Flu

[00:10:57] With normal life and in a [civilian](#)<sup>31</sup> environment, a non-war environment, like we are in now, what normally happens is that those people who have the worse [mutations](#)<sup>32</sup> of the virus stay home or are [confined](#)<sup>33</sup> to a hospital.

[00:11:18] So they are relatively [isolated](#)<sup>34</sup> and it is less likely that they pass the virus on to anyone else.

[00:11:27] And those people that have the more [mild](#)<sup>35</sup> versions of the virus [tend](#)<sup>36</sup> to continue their normal life, and so if they spread the virus to others, they are spreading the more [mild](#) version of it.

[00:11:46] But with soldiers in World War One things were the opposite.

[00:11:52] The soldiers who had the mild versions of it stayed to fight.

[00:11:58] The army needed every soldier that could fight, and if they had a mild flu, well that wasn't bad enough to send them away from the [front lines](#)<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> a person who is not a member of the police or the armed forces

<sup>32</sup> the way in which things change and produce permanent differences

<sup>33</sup> to limit an activity, person, or problem in some way

<sup>34</sup> not near to other places

<sup>35</sup> not violent, severe, or extreme

<sup>36</sup> to be likely to behave in a particular way or have a particular characteristic

<sup>37</sup> a place where opposing armies face each other in war and where fighting happens

## The Spanish Flu

[00:12:09] And the soldiers who had the worse, more [deadly<sup>38</sup> mutations](#) of it were sent away in [packed<sup>39</sup>](#) trains and boats back home where they then passed the stronger, more [deadly mutation](#) of the virus on to others.

[00:12:30] The result of this was that The Spanish Flu was even more deadly during the so-called second wave, which occurred during the autumn and winter of 1918 after [troops<sup>40</sup>](#) had started to be sent home.

[00:12:49] One thing that I found really interesting when researching more about The Spanish Flu was how many governments actually did a quite good job of containing it and [implemented<sup>41</sup>](#) almost exactly the same sort of [measures<sup>42</sup>](#) as are being done in lots of different countries around the world today.

[00:13:14] It's obviously not revolutionary and doesn't take a PhD in [epidemiology<sup>43</sup>](#) to figure out, but back in 1918 over a hundred years ago, the main way in which governments tried to stop the spread of the virus was through what we are now calling social distancing.

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<sup>38</sup> likely to cause death

<sup>39</sup> very full of people

<sup>40</sup> soldiers

<sup>41</sup> to start using a plan or system

<sup>42</sup> way of achieving something, or method for dealing with a situation

<sup>43</sup> the scientific study of diseases and how they are found, spread, and controlled in groups of people

## The Spanish Flu

[00:13:35] They had figured out that the virus was [transmitted](#)<sup>44</sup> through the air, through breathing, coughing, or sneezing.

[00:13:44] And exactly as we are doing now, they had figured out that if you can stop people coming into contact with each other, then that is pretty much the most effective way to [squash](#)<sup>45</sup> it, to [eradicate](#)<sup>46</sup> the virus.

[00:14:01] And they had to contain it, they had to stop it being passed from person to person, as there was another similarity to the situation that we are in now.

[00:14:13] They also didn't have a [vaccine](#)<sup>47</sup>.

[00:14:16] But the other thing that they didn't have, which we of course do have now, is some kind of global health authority that can [coordinate](#)<sup>48</sup> a response across the whole world.

[00:14:31] Back in 1918 it was every country for itself.

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<sup>44</sup> passed, infect

<sup>45</sup> to crush something into a flat shape

<sup>46</sup> to get rid of something completely or destroy something bad

<sup>47</sup> a substance containing a virus or bacterium in a form that is not harmful, given to a person or animal to prevent them from getting the disease that the virus or bacterium causes

<sup>48</sup> to make many different things work effectively as a whole



## The Spanish Flu

[00:14:35] There was no WHO until 1948, and communication and [collaboration](#)<sup>49</sup> between doctors and health officials was a whole lot more complicated than it is now.

[00:14:50] So the response was much more [contained](#)<sup>50</sup> on a country or even [municipal](#)<sup>51</sup> or city level.

[00:14:58] Different cities in the US would respond in different ways.

[00:15:03] There wasn't really a [coordinated](#) response whereby every city employed the same measures, which is another interesting [parallel](#)<sup>52</sup> with today's situation perhaps.

[00:15:16] But some of the strategies that they [implemented](#) back then were also quite [ingenious](#)<sup>53</sup>.

[00:15:23] In New York, for example, to cut down the amount of people traveling in rush hour they made different types of shops and offices open and close at different times.

[00:15:35] Another controversial thing that was done, and it's still debated whether this was actually a good policy, was that in New York the schools were kept open, they weren't closed.

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<sup>49</sup> to work with someone else for a special purpose

<sup>50</sup> to keep under control

<sup>51</sup> of or belonging to a town or city

<sup>52</sup> something very similar to something else, or a similarity between two things

<sup>53</sup> (of a person) very intelligent and skilful, or (of a thing) skilfully made or planned and involving new ideas and methods

## The Spanish Flu

[00:15:49] The theory behind this was that in New York there was a very large immigrant population who lived in very [cramped](#)<sup>54</sup>, closed conditions, and that the children would be better outside that situation than in it.

[00:16:09] Another reason that they decided to do this was also that the authorities could pass messages to the immigrant population about the virus through the children.

[00:16:23] Lots of these immigrants had very poor English, and so their children would learn about the latest advice at school, then they would return home and inform their parents.

[00:16:37] So that's one quite interesting policy, although, as I said, it's still debated whether it actually did any good.

[00:16:48] There are, however, a few decisions that cities took back then that we can look back at and say, that seemed to work or that didn't work.

[00:16:59] And specifically the cities in the United States that closed down for the longest, versus the ones that opened up quickly or didn't really close at all.

[00:17:10] It might not surprise you to find out that the ones that kept closed, that kept their social distancing rules for longer, such as St Louis, not only, lost fewer lives, but had a stronger economic recovery in the long term.

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<sup>54</sup> not having enough space or time

## The Spanish Flu

[00:17:28] So, closing down actually helps you [bounce back](#)<sup>55</sup> and grow faster afterwards.

[00:17:36] This is of course something that public health officials, economists, policy makers and politicians in the United States are well aware of, but there is an election this year and telling people to stay at home and not allowing businesses to [reopen](#)<sup>56</sup>, that isn't always a particularly popular decision with people, even if our experience of the world's most [deadly](#) pandemic suggests that it might be the better decision, both from a public health point of view and economic point of view.

[00:18:12] One other fascinating story about The Spanish Flu with which we will end today's podcast, and I will leave you to [draw any parallels](#)<sup>57</sup> you want with what is going on today, is how all sorts of nonqualified people start suggesting some very strange cures for it, and they all seem to have an [ulterior](#)<sup>58</sup> motive.

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<sup>55</sup> to start to be successful again after a difficult period, for example after experiencing failure, loss of confidence, illness, or unhappiness

<sup>56</sup> If a place or business, etc. reopens or is reopened, it begins to operate, or it becomes open for people to use, after being closed for a period of time

<sup>57</sup> make a comparison between things

<sup>58</sup> a secret purpose or reason for doing something

## The Spanish Flu

[00:18:40] On June the 28th, 1918 there was a notice in the British papers that advised readers of the [symptoms](#)<sup>59</sup> of the flu and gave them some tips and suggestions on things they could do to prevent it.

[00:18:58] The notice [stated](#)<sup>60</sup> that a certain type of [mint](#)<sup>61</sup>, a sweet, a candy, was the best way to prevent the infection, and that everyone, including children, should take at least five of these mints per day until they felt better.

[00:19:16] However, it turned out that this wasn't an official government notice.

[00:19:21] Not at all.

[00:19:22] It was actually an advertisement, an advert, by a company called Formamints, who surprise surprise, made the mints.

[00:19:34] Well, if I bring it back to what's going on today, I guess you are probably better off sucking mints than doing some of the other things that have been suggested by various people in positions of power.

[00:19:49] I think we both know who I'm talking about here.

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<sup>59</sup> any feeling of illness or physical or mental change that is caused by a particular disease

<sup>60</sup> said

<sup>61</sup> a sweet tasting of mint (the herb)

## The Spanish Flu

[00:19:52] And with that little [anecdote](#)<sup>62</sup> comes the end of this introduction to The Spanish Flu and some of the more interesting stories behind it.

[00:20:04] It is a fascinating period in human history and for obvious reasons it's something that policy makers, public health officials and politicians have started to pay a lot closer attention to.

[00:20:18] Yes, there are of course lessons that we can learn from history and The Spanish Flu is no exception, but we should be a little wary of reading too much into it .

[00:20:29] The world was a very different place and we are significantly better [equipped](#)<sup>63</sup> now to deal with a pandemic than the world was a hundred years ago, after four years of better fighting.

[00:20:43] But even after all of these scientific and technological inventions, I find it quite [refreshing](#)<sup>64</sup>, in one way, to think about the fact that the guidance on how to beat this pandemic, this influenza, is basically exactly the same as it was a hundred years ago, and that is stay inside, cover your face and avoid contact with people if you possibly can.

[00:21:11] So I'll just finish by saying that I hope you're keeping well wherever you are.

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<sup>62</sup> a short, often funny story, especially about something someone has done

<sup>63</sup> having the necessary tools, clothes, equipment, etc.

<sup>64</sup> pleasantly different and interesting



**English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #048**  
**The Spanish Flu**

[00:21:17] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English.

[00:21:22] I am Alastair Budge, you stay safe and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

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## Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Right up your street	to be the type of thing that you are interested in or that you enjoy doing
Somewhat	to some degree
Fading from memory	becoming forgotten
Scrambling	to move or climb quickly but with difficulty, often using your hands to help you
Confront	to face, meet, or deal with a difficult situation or person
Dragged	pulled
Fruitless	If an action or attempt to do something is fruitless, it is unsuccessful or produces nothing of value
Devastated	completely destroyed
Worn down	to make someone tired
Rates	the speed at which something happens or changes, or the amount or number of times it happens or changes in a particular period
Ravaged	to cause great damage to something

## The Spanish Flu

<b>Range</b>	to have an upper and a lower limit in amount, number, etc.
<b>Diagnose</b>	to recognise and name the exact character of a disease or a problem, by examining it
<b>Neutral</b>	not saying or doing anything that would encourage or help any of the groups involved in an argument or war
<b>Neutrality</b>	a neutral position, especially in a war
<b>Morale</b>	the amount of confidence felt by a person or group of people, especially when in a dangerous or difficult situation
<b>Detrimental</b>	causing harm or damage
<b>Conflict</b>	war
<b>Scale</b>	level, amount
<b>Trench</b>	a narrow hole that is dug into the ground
<b>Barbed wire</b>	a type of strong wire with sharp points on it, used to prevent people or animals from entering or leaving a place , especially a field
<b>Divine</b>	connected with a god, or like a god
<b>Credible</b>	able to be believed or trusted
<b>Strain</b>	an animal or plant from a particular group whose characteristics are

## The Spanish Flu

different in some way from others of the same group

### Broadly

in a general way, without considering specific examples or all the details

### Close proximity

close to one another

### Barracks

a building or group of buildings where soldiers live

### Confinement

the situation in which a person or animal is kept somewhere, usually by force

### Overflowing

When a liquid overflows, it flows over the edges of a container, etc. because there is too much of it

### Mutates

to change from one thing or type of thing into another

### Civilian

a person who is not a member of the police or the armed forces

### Mutations

the way in which things change and produce permanent differences

### Confined

to limit an activity, person, or problem in some way

### Isolated

not near to other places

### Mild

not violent, severe, or extreme

### Tend

to be likely to behave in a particular way or have a particular characteristic

## The Spanish Flu

<b>Front lines</b>	a place where opposing armies face each other in war and where fighting happens
<b>Deadly</b>	likely to cause death
<b>Packed</b>	very full of people
<b>Troops</b>	soldiers
<b>Implemented</b>	to start using a plan or system
<b>Measures</b>	way of achieving something, or method for dealing with a situation
<b>Epidemiology</b>	the scientific study of diseases and how they are found, spread, and controlled in groups of people
<b>Transmitted</b>	passed, infect
<b>Squash</b>	to crush something into a flat shape
<b>Eradicate</b>	to get rid of something completely or destroy something bad
<b>Vaccine</b>	a substance containing a virus or bacterium in a form that is not harmful, given to a person or animal to prevent them from getting the disease that the virus or bacterium causes
<b>Coordinate</b>	to make many different things work effectively as a whole
<b>Collaboration</b>	to work with someone else for a special purpose



## The Spanish Flu

<b>Contained</b>	to keep under control
<b>Municipal</b>	of or belonging to a town or city
<b>Parallel</b>	something very similar to something else, or a similarity between two things
<b>Ingenious</b>	(of a person) very intelligent and skilful, or (of a thing) skilfully made or planned and involving new ideas and methods
<b>Cramped</b>	not having enough space or time
<b>Bounce back</b>	to start to be successful again after a difficult period, for example after experiencing failure, loss of confidence, illness, or unhappiness
<b>Reopen</b>	If a place or business, etc. reopens or is reopened, it begins to operate, or it becomes open for people to use, after being closed for a period of time
<b>Draw any parallels</b>	make a comparison between things
<b>Ulterior</b>	a secret purpose or reason for doing something
<b>Symptoms</b>	any feeling of illness or physical or mental change that is caused by a particular disease
<b>Stated</b>	said

## English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #048

### The Spanish Flu

Mint	a sweet tasting of mint (the herb)
Anecdote	a short, often funny story, especially about something someone has done
Equipped	having the necessary tools, clothes, equipment, etc.
Refreshing	pleasantly different and interesting

*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](mailto:hi@leonardoenglish.com).*