

# English the Smart Way

Podcast Session 6:

**Stop studying grammar and focus on listening!**

**Interview with Kristin Dodds from Learn Real English**

Show Notes: <http://englishthesmartway.com/session6>

## Introduction

**Ivan:** Hey, what's up everybody? Ivan Ottinger here. Thank you so much for joining me again on another episode of the English the Smart Way podcast. I'm really excited because today I'm talking to one of the founders and teachers of Learn Real English, Kristin Dodds.

Kristin has more than 20 years of experience teaching English to speakers of other languages. She has taught English in South Korea, Thailand and Japan, as well as in the United States. She has a CELTA certificate, as well as a Master's degree in TESOL, which [of course] stands for Teaching English to Speakers of other Languages.

Kristin Dodds with AJ Hoge and Joe Weiss run together Learn Real English which helps students around the world becoming fluent and confident English speakers.

The Real English Conversation Lessons - which is the name of the course - teaches you English without focusing on grammar rules. Instead, you'll listen to real English conversations of native English speakers. This way, you will learn grammar subconsciously without even realizing it. :)

In the first part of our interview, Kristin is sharing with us her challenging first experience in teaching English in South Korea and her soon realization that studying grammar to succeed in English isn't effective at all. Later in the interview, Kristin talks about acquiring language in the most natural way - by listening a lot - which is actually very similar to the way how children learn language.

We also talk about how opening up to culture of a country can help us tremendously with our language learning. Kristin then shares with us the success story of her Thai friend, her number one tip for English learners, and she also talks about the benefits of free voluntary reading.

Let's dive right into the interview.

This is Kristin Dodds from Learn Real English. Here we go.

## Interview

**Ivan:** What's up everybody? I'm super happy to bring on Kristin Dodds from Learn Real English. She is one of the founders and teachers of Learn Real English. I have to say that I have discovered Learn Real English just about a year ago when my friend Massimo invited me to join his online conversation group.

Massimo told me about you Kristin, your great English course and how it has helped him to become fluent in English. I wanted to experience how's the Learn Real English course like, so I decided to join the course last summer. :)

Today, I am really excited about our interview because I know that many of our listeners know you already; and at the same time there are so many English learners who will meet you for the first time today! I believe everyone listening will learn something useful, practical and we will all get inspired! Thank you for being here Kristin and welcome to the show.

**Kristin:** Thank you Ivan and thank you for having me.

**Ivan:** I'm really happy that you accepted the invitation. You know when I started podcasting it was just an idea that maybe someday in the future we would have a talk like this. I'm really happy about it.

**Kristin:** Well, good.

**Ivan:** As I said, I know that many people, subscribers and members of English the Smart Way know you already because they joined your course and so on and so on. Anyway, there are many people who don't know you yet. Could you please tell us a little about you? Your hobbies, your interests, anything you like.

**Kristin:** Okay, sure. I'll start off by saying I live in San Francisco, a very beautiful city here in the state of California on the West coast of the United States. I've been living here for 9, maybe almost 10 years at this point. Actually before living in San Francisco, I was living in Thailand where I was teaching English. I've been teaching English for about 20 years now. I've taught all ages from kindergarten actually all through into college age and then adults.

I started off by teaching in Korea. I've actually taught in Korea, in Japan, in Thailand, and I've done live seminars in Thailand and Malaysia and I've also taught here in the United States actually in the state of Georgia which is in the southeastern part of the United States. It's right above Florida. Many people know Florida because of Disney World. That's the state that I grew up in. I've taught adults in Georgia.

Then now, I have with Joe and AJ, we have Learn Real English together. We teach our students, our students are around the world because it's an internet-based business.

Some of my hobbies are being out in nature, traveling around the world. I love traveling, learning about other cultures and meeting people in other countries, learning about their cultures. I have a deep passion for animals. I've volunteered at many different places with animals. In fact, I've even done this at times when I've travelled.

For example, one time, Joe and I actually, volunteered at an elephant sanctuary in Northern Thailand. We were helping do different things around the sanctuary just to help maintain the sanctuary that these elephants that have been rescued from abusive situations where they are currently living in much better conditions. That's a little about me.

I wanted to go back and say, when I was speaking about Learn Real English and how our students are around the world. They're actually adult students because our lessons are made more for adults and adults also have at least an intermediate level understanding of English.

**Ivan:** Oh yeah.

**Kristin:** Understanding of English.

**Ivan:** Yeah. Thank you for your introduction. There are so many questions that are coming to my mind that I would like to ask you. Where to start? More than 20 years of teaching English in different age categories of your students. What was your motivation to go into teaching?

**Kristin:** Well, it's kind of funny. My mom actually was a teacher. She's retired now. She was a high school English teacher and she always encouraged me growing up to become a teacher and I never wanted to. Probably because that's what she did and I wanted to do something different. I've always been very drawn – when I say drawn, I've always been very interested, as I said a little while ago, in other cultures and people from other countries. I guess it makes sense to me why I got into teaching people from other countries, teaching them English.

What started this was an opportunity that I had right after I graduated from college with my bachelor's degree. I had an opportunity to go to Korea to teach English for a year. What interested me the most in doing this was actually to go live in another country. I was very young. I was just out of college. I really wanted to travel. That is what started me teaching English. I got to Korea and I didn't know anything about teaching English. I didn't know anything about teaching. I've gotten my undergraduate degree in something completely unrelated. I was told that there would be a training to teach me how to teach.

**Ivan:** Oh yeah.

**Kristin:** There really wasn't any training, just put into the classroom and expected to teach. I quickly learned things to do in the classroom. But after that, my time in Korea, I realized that I wanted to teach more in other countries but I needed training to do that. I went back to Georgia, the state where I grew up at, and started teaching adults there and taught them for a bit and then I decided to go and get a teaching certificate. It was a one-month intensive program in Boston. I went and did that one summer. Then, I felt like I wanted more training. A few years later then, I got my master's degree to teach English just because of other languages. That's how that kind of started.

**Ivan:** But your first experience with teaching English was in Japan, right?

**Kristin:** No, Korea.

**Ivan:** Oh, sorry, Korea.

**Kristin:** Yes, Korea.

**Ivan:** But it was quite tough experience when you expected that you would get some, how to say -

**Kristin:** Training.

**Ivan:** Some training in teaching and you didn't get that.

**Kristin:** No.

**Ivan:** You didn't have any training, what did you when you went to a class with children?

**Kristin:** Me and – I think there were 20 teachers. They were mostly from North America so they're from Canada and the United States. We would all kind of bounce ideas off of each other. That's an idiom, bounce ideas, meaning we would talk to each other and share ideas.

**Ivan:** Yeah.

**Kristin:** It was hard. We would play a lot of games. We would teach through songs, that was really good with the younger children. Beatles songs are great because the lyrics are very easy. Actually, we would do Beatles songs with the older kids. Then, you know, children songs in English, teaching those to the younger kids, they loved it. Games, songs, we were given books to use. These little grammar books, we would use those a lot. I was actually teaching grammar then. I no longer do that.

**Ivan:** Yeah.

**Kristin:** Yeah, it was very challenging.

**Ivan:** I can imagine. Yeah. You mentioned that the time when you taught English in Korea you used grammar books because you were told to use those Grammar books, right?

**Kristin:** Yes. We were told to and some of the Korean staff would actually come around and look in our windows, into our classrooms to make sure that we were teaching the way they wanted us to teach.

**Ivan:** Interesting. They want to take to control over how the -

**Kristin:** Very much. That was a little intimidating and it was very frustrating for many of the teachers because we felt like we weren't – none of us were truly teachers and we haven't been trained and the Korean staff – this was just a big cultural difference that Koreans – we would have meetings and the Korean staff would tell us in the meetings everything bad that we were doing with our teaching and they wouldn't have any suggestions. That just kind of made the teachers angry.

**Ivan:** Yeah.

**Kristin:** We weren't used to being told what to do and there was no positive reinforcement, basically.

**Ivan:** Yeah.

**Kristin:** We felt like we couldn't really talk to the Korean staff to suggest ideas because it's very much a hierarchal system. It was more like, "We're your boss, we tell you this, you do it."

**Ivan:** Okay.

**Kristin:** It was not only that we didn't get trained well, but there was a whole cultural difference too that made it very complex and challenging.

**Ivan:** Yeah. I can imagine. First experience in teaching, altogether? Yeah?

**Kristin:** Yeah. The good news is when I left and I moved back to Georgia and got the job teaching adults, it was very much a supportive environment and I could do whatever I wanted to do and

was supported. It was the exact opposite of what I had experience in Korea. That part is good because I was a little hesitant after my experience in Korea to teach anymore.

**Ivan:** Yeah, because of that bad experience you had.

**Kristin:** Yes.

**Ivan:** When you were in Georgia, your students there were adults mostly, yeah?

**Kristin:** Yes. They were all adults.

**Ivan:** What have you learned from teaching adults?

**Kristin:** With the adults, again I was given textbooks. We were using those because here again, I didn't really have any training to be teaching. I didn't know what to do so we would just go through these grammar textbooks. I was seeing that they weren't very effective actually.

I can remember this one guy, he was the sweetest guy and he came up to me one day after class. He didn't understand very much when I spoke and his English was very broken but he showed me his notebook where he had written down all of these sentences in English and he was trying to memorize them. I didn't say anything to him but I just realize, this is not effective. But I still didn't quite know how to teach.

**Ivan:** Oh yeah.

**Kristin:** You know?

**Ivan:** Mm-hm.

**Kristin:** What a good effective way would be to teach? I didn't quite have that knowledge yet. I got that knowledge when I was getting my master's degree and doing some research for my degree and that's when I discovered a man named Stephen Krashen as well as a man named James Asher. Stephen Krashen has a lot of research about a Listen First approach. That's how children actually learn or from being a baby actually, that's how a baby into a child and then as they grow, that's how a language is actually naturally acquired.

**Ivan:** Yeah.

**Kristin:** It's just listening, listening, listening. A lot of listening.

I was just speaking to AJ the other day. He's visiting his family in Indiana right now and he has two nephews that his sister and her husband adopted from China and they're two years old. These two little Chinese boys, they're not even brothers, they were adopted from different places. AJ's sister's had them for about a year now. He was telling me how they're really only saying yes or no but he said it's so amazing how much they understand. Even though they're not speaking, they're only speaking a few words, they understand so much. It's that natural, just listening, taking everything in.

There was something else I was going to say. I'm not quite sure at what age children start speaking. I can't recall that but as AJ pointed out, these two little boys are two years old and they were in China and so they were about one. They've actually been in America being exposed to English for about a year now but it's still amazing how much they're understanding.

**Ivan:** Yeah, just from listening. Being in the environment.

**Kristin:** Yes. Total immersion.

**Ivan:** With your master's, you focused on techniques of teaching English, right?

**Kristin:** Yes. In a more natural way without teaching grammar. That is carried over into Learn Real English. We don't teach grammar at all.

**Ivan:** Yeah. That's really a good point that you mentioned that you didn't teach grammar rules in your course. I believe that many people find this fact surprising because as students, we usually are used to this education system where grammar is often the number one thing that we focus on. Could you please introduce to us your Real English conversation lessons, in a brief?

**Kristin:** Yeah. Basically, the Real English conversations, it's 30 lesson sets. In each of those sets is a conversation. It's a real conversation between two native English speakers and at least one of those speakers is either me, Joe, or AJ and then maybe we're having a conversation with each other or maybe it's with someone else. For example, there's one conversation that I have with my mom. It's real native speakers having a conversation and then there's a vocabulary lesson where it's any idioms or slang or words that are difficult to explain. They're explained in the vocabulary lesson then.

**Ivan:** Yeah.

**Kristin:** And then there's a mini story. It's a Listen-and-Answer method. That mini story then is done again, the same story is told again from different points of view. What that means is they're told in different tenses. There's not grammar being taught but it's there because the Listen-and-Answer stories are being told in different verb tenses. You're naturally, automatically getting the grammar.

**Ivan:** Yeah.

**Kristin:** You don't realize you're not focusing so much on that.

**Ivan:** Yeah.

**Kristin:** The main techniques are the Listen-and-Answer method of the mini stories and point of views and then the Listen First approach. Just listening. We recommend with our lessons - we call it deep listening. Repeating, listening to the lessons. Just listening to them as much as you can so it goes deeper and deeper into your brain, into your mind.

**Ivan:** Yeah. It's like with children because they listen to the same phrases again and again.

**Kristin:** Yes. The repetition. It's something that's really key with children, they're getting so much repetition over and over and over again.

**Ivan:** Yeah, exactly. You mentioned that you also visited Thailand. What was your experience in teaching English in Thailand?

**Kristin:** Again it was not a great experience because at this point, I was finished with my master's degree so I knew how I wanted to be teaching but I was working at a private school. I was teaching

at this school that was teaching these students, it was like a study program for them to take the IELTS tests.

**Ivan:** Yeah.

**Kristin:** It was kind of boring for me. There was a lot of grammar and ways I just didn't really want to be teaching. This was before me moving back to the United States and then a few years later starting Learn Real English.

It's interesting, while I was in Thailand living there, I actually had a really great experience. I met a Thai man and we started dating. When I first met him, his English level was very low, like we could barely communicate because I could only say a few words in Thai. He could speak enough in English to where we could understand each other but it was difficult. It was challenging. Because he did speak more English than I spoke Thai, that's how we communicated. I was in Thailand living for two and a half years and we were together – I met him pretty soon after moving there. We were together most of that time and then he ended up coming here with me to the United States.

Fast-forward or jump ahead, 10, 13 years, it's that right? Gosh. I guess that's about right. His English is unbelievable. He's still here in the United States and he's fluent now. He does have an accent but you can completely understand him. I'm just so proud of him. We're no longer together but we're still friends.

I'm just so amazed – just from being in a relationship with me and – I started to say being immersed in the language, that's not so much the case because when we were in Thailand obviously were still in his country. Other than speaking to me in English, he spoke Thai everywhere else. I would say his English really took off. His English really increased when he moved here to the United States, eight, nine years ago.

Also, he couldn't read any English. He could not read or write any English and now, he's learning how to do that. What's really helped him with that is texting people on his cellphone or emailing people because a lot of people here text or email, text especially. We're just all too busy to call each other for some reason so we text. He wanted to fit into the culture that way. He's learned how to read and write English or I should say type it on his phone so he can text his friends but he can also – he's not just typing on his phone. He can also write.

**Ivan:** Yeah, yeah.

**Kristin:** Yeah.

**Ivan:** Wonderful. I totally agree with you with improving in writing by writing because many people, when I receive messages from my subscribers, many of them ask me how can I write better English? I always tell them, just write. Find some friend online, have a chat with them because that's the way I learned.

**Kristin:** Oh, it is.

**Ivan:** Yeah. Yeah. Because I went to school and I'm also using English there but from writing articles for example, on my blog, that helped me so much to express myself in writing.

**Kristin:** Yes. You know, another thing to do is it's called Free Voluntary Reading. Finding something, a topic, literature on a topic that interests you. It could be a magazine or a book, whatever and just reading as much as you can in English and then kind of like with the Listen First approach,

eventually over time, if you're just reading and reading in English, it's going to become kind of automatic where you're able to form the structures of sentences and be able to write.

**Ivan:** Yeah. I totally agree with you. Your Thai friend, he could first speak, I mean, first he listened to lots of English but he learned how to write after he could speak English, right?

**Kristin:** Yes. That came much later. I know from teaching in other countries and also speaking to people from other countries, a lot of times they learn how to read and write English in their public schools growing up. He left school I think at some point when he was in high school. He didn't even finish. He didn't graduate. He told me too, he was a really bad student. He's an artist. The academic way of life was not for him.

**Ivan:** Yeah.

**Kristin:** Even if he had had English classes – I think he said he did, he just didn't do well in them. You know what's so funny? He now has a Thai girlfriend, they're actually going to be married soon and she's going to be moving here with him. She has a master's degree from a university in Thailand, so her reading and writing is much better than him but her speaking ability is not. I'm sure once she moves over here, if she really opens herself up to the language, her speaking will get much better.

That's something else too. I think you have to have that interest in the culture and in the language to really open yourself up and it'll come. So with Wat, my Thai friend, he had that from the beginning. He really was open to other cultures, not just America, it just so happened he met me. He was selling Jewelry that he made in a very touristy area in Bangkok and he needed to learn English to be able to sell his jewelry to tourists because most everyone was speaking English. That's pretty much the language when you travel that other people speak. He started learning it for that reason.

He was driven for his business but also he was very curious and interested in other cultures. I say interested, I can remember he was so open. When we would go eat – if I would take him to a restaurant in Bangkok that was more Western food, he was open to try anything. I remember some of his Thai friends would say to him, "I don't know how you can eat that food." They would only want Thai food. "How do you eat a sandwich? Bread? Yuck. What is that?" He was so open and I think that fully helps when you open yourself to whatever culture and language – whatever language you're trying to learn, you really open yourself to the culture, it just helps tremendously.

**Ivan:** Yeah. I totally agree because it's connected, language with culture.

**Kristin:** Yes.

**Ivan:** You know what I like about Learn Real English, about your course, is that you teach idioms. There are so many, like the stone's thrown away.

**Kristin:** Yeah.

**Ivan:** Many phrases. Some of the phrases I learned there, I can identify them that we use very similar phrases in our own language but there are so many that are new to me. It creates a vision of your culture, idioms.

**Kristin:** Yes. Well, that's the thing that sets us apart from a lot of teachers that teach with grammar or with a textbook. A language is alive. It's driven by the culture and it changes. That's what I mean

by it's alive. It's changing, constantly. You don't get that piece of it from a textbook. To me, when you learn from a textbook – let's say if I were to learn French from a textbook and then I went to France, maybe I could speak to people but I would probably miss out on a lot of things that they're saying because I wouldn't get that in the textbook. I wouldn't get real conversations. It'll be a completely different experience.

**Ivan:** Yeah. Exactly. I studied English here, it's the like. We use textbooks. I believe the textbooks are still used in schools here. When I came to England, I was like, "Oh, you are using different phrases that I'm used to from textbooks." I don't remember the exact words or exact phrases that we are taught in school. When I went England and I had a chat with my friends there I just told them a few phrases that we were taught by textbooks in Slovakia and they were like, "It's quite an old way to say this. Maybe my grandfather would use this phrase."

**Kristin:** Right?

**Ivan:** I was like, "Okay, okay. That's interesting."

**Kristin:** Yeah. That's what I was going to say too. It could be a little bit outdated even.

**Ivan:** Yeah.

**Kristin:** Or very formal. English is so informal but sometimes if you're learning from a textbook you can make it more formal than it is or stiff and serious. English is so informal.

**Ivan:** Yeah. Especially the last few years or maybe ten years when information technology got so popular and people are communicating really fast and they cut words and creating new words like selfie.

**Kristin:** Yes.

**Ivan:** Words that haven't been here.

**Kristin:** Right.

**Ivan:** Textbooks just can't keep up with the speed of how English evolved probably.

**Kristin:** No. I wanted to say something really quickly. I just said English is so informal. I should make a correction and say that American English is very informal. I obviously can't speak to British English or Australian English. American English is very informal.

**Ivan:** Yeah. Many learners when they're in the phase when they are starting speaking English, they don't how to speak so their first idea is to first think about the sentence in their native language and then translating the sentence to English. Afterwards, saying the sentence to another person. Sometimes we just translate and then we say the sentence in English. There's so many problems because if we translate, if we don't think in English, then we can't become fluent, and we can't react fast enough when we are in a conversation with someone. My question would be how can one start thinking in English and become fluent in it, do you have any ideas about it?

**Kristin:** What I would first say is that if people are translating then the level of English is maybe beyond what they understand, what they're able to understand, what they're capable of understanding. It goes back to the Listen First approach. It's a time-consuming process, it's an investment of time for sur. But if you really want to start automatically thinking in English, it's a

matter of listening to massive amounts of English. When I say massive, I mean large amounts. You've got to put in the time so it's deep learning. And then, with more and more time put in of listening, it becomes automatic and there isn't that delay of trying to translate it. Does that make sense?

**Ivan:** Yeah, sure. Deep learning and absorbing a lot of English.

**Kristin:** Yes.

**Ivan:** Talking when we are ready to talk, right?

**Kristin:** Yes, exactly. Yes. So many times, people put pressure on themselves to talk. That's so unnatural and that can be too where it could be when people freeze up, they can't think and maybe they start trying to translate and maybe they're getting really anxious like they're feeling like they need to perform even.

Just being easy on yourself, this would be my advice for people to be easy on themselves and not feel like they have to perform or speak before they're ready to. Just getting the listening in, you're putting the time and you really listen.

**Ivan:** Kristin, what would be your number one tip for English learners around the world?

**Kristin:** I would say the number one tip would be to stop studying grammar and focus on listening and to try this for at least one year and see how it goes.

**Ivan:** That's a challenge.

**Kristin:** Yeah, it is. Honestly, Ivan, this approach is not for everyone. Some people really want to study grammar and that's fine if that's how – if they really resonate with that approach, that method. You resonated if they really like that way of learning then that's fine. But if what has been spoken about today in this interview appeals to any of you, then that would be my number one tip. Stop studying grammar and focus on listening and try it for at least one year.

**Ivan:** Right. Thank you very much Kristin.

**Kristin:** Yeah.

**Ivan:** Where can people learn more about you, about your work, and about your course, and anything else?

**Kristin:** Yes. You can learn more about me. Remember, it's not just me, there's two other people, AJ Hoge and Joe Weiss. We are Learn Real English, the three of us. You can learn more about us through Ivan's podcast site. It's [englishthesmartway.com/kristin](http://englishthesmartway.com/kristin). You can find us through Ivan's podcast site because he is an affiliate of ours.

**Ivan:** Thank you very much Kristin. I know that you also offer a free 7-day deal course. Maybe you could tell our listeners about this free course.

**Kristin:** Yeah, if you go to the link that I just said, you will be taken to our homepage, Learn Real English homepage. You can read about us on our homepage obviously. There's also at the bottom of the page, if you scroll all the way to the bottom, there's a place where you can sign up for our free 7-day email course. What that means is that if you sign up, if you choose to put in your email information, you will receive an email every day for seven days and each of those days, you'll get a

free English tip. It's completely free and you can unsubscribe at any time. Not only will you get a free English tip but you'll learn more about real English conversations.

**Ivan:** Thank you very much, Kristin. I really appreciate that you have taken the time to be with us today and I'm really happy that we could have this conversation today.

**Kristin:** Well, thanks so much for inviting me. It was really fun doing the interview with you.

### **Wrap-up**

**Ivan:** Alright everybody, I hope you enjoy that interview with Kristin from Learn Real English. If you want to check out Learn Real English, you can check it out through my affiliate link, which is [englishthesmartway.com/kristin](https://englishthesmartway.com/kristin). That way, you will support English the Smart Way project. Again, that's [englishthesmartway.com/kristin](https://englishthesmartway.com/kristin).

You can get the show notes, full transcript of this podcast episode, and the links to the resources mentioned in this show as always at [englishthesmartway.com/session6](https://englishthesmartway.com/session6). You will also find the link to my personal review of Real English Conversation Lessons because I have been using these lessons personally. Again, the show notes are available at [englishthesmartway.com/session6](https://englishthesmartway.com/session6).

Thank you so much guys. I appreciate you listening in. I look forward to serving you in the next podcast show. Until then, keep pushing forward. Keep working on your English. It's one of those things that is amazing to master. Every little step in English we take can bring us so much joy and success in all other areas of our lives. Fluent English is definitely worth that work that we need to put in.

Take care and I'll see you in the next episode. Bye.

### **Links and Resources Mentioned in This Episode:**

- [Real English Conversation Lessons \(official website\)](#)
- [Research of Stephen D. Krashen](#)
- [My personal experience with Real English Conversation Lessons course](#)
- [English Success Story - interview with my friend Massimo](#)
- [Why is the phrase "it is raining cats and dogs" no longer used?](#) (this wasn't actually mentioned on the show, but it is related to the topic :)