



Kev's English Podcast: Episode 21: Interview with Wen from China: how she took IELTS and what her successful strategy is!

In this episode, I talk to one of my italki students, Wen from China. We talk about her English journey and especially her successful strategy that helped her get 7.5 in IELTS.

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Hello and welcome to Kev's English Podcast, Real English, every week.

Hello, hello, Wen, are you there? Yeah, yeah, I'm here. Oh.

Yeah, I can hear your voice. Yeah. Are you not using your camera today? No.

Okay, if you don't want to use it, that's fine. Anyway, listen, before we start, thanks for coming on. Much appreciated.

Okay, it's a pleasure. Yeah. So with my podcast, what I'm trying to do is talk to my, well, to my contacts and students around the world and just talk about different things.

What exams they might have taken, what's English like in their country, etc. So before we talk about that, could you maybe introduce yourself a little? Yes, yes. Okay, so I'm an English lover from China.

I currently stay in Wuhan city, which is located in the central part of China. So I have been studying English for more than 10 years, I guess ever since I was in senior high. So I quite like this language and I want to continuously improve my English language skill.

Yeah, so that's all about me. Well, thanks. That's quite good.

So why did you decide to take the IELTS? Can you maybe tell us a little bit about why exactly you

chose that particular exam? Okay, I guess there might be two reasons. So the first one is that back to those days when I was a student, I had to take the IELTS exam in order to partly qualify to get the, how to say, get the offer from university. So that is one of the requirements from universities.

And the other reason, I mean, now I have already been working for several years and I still believe IELTS is one of the international language proficiency tests in the world to prove a non-native speaker's English level. So that's why I still keep me updated to information associated with this test. So how many times have you taken IELTS? I guess I just taken this examination for more than, maybe I guess for more than 10 times.

10 times? 10 times? Yeah. You never told me that. So it seems like you are a little bit surprised about the times, right? I'm surprised now that you've told me this now.

10 times. That's a lot. 10 times.

As I mentioned, when I was a student, back to that day, I wanted to go abroad. And so I had to take English test, international English test, in order to get qualified to universities outside of places of China. You know, in a world, either you took TOEFL or you take IELTS.

But of course, there are some other language proficiency tests like Duolingo English test, but I think TOEFL and IELTS are widely used. So this is part of a reason. Yeah.

Why is it been 10 times? I mean, right. So how many times did you take it before you got your score to go to university? Two times. You took it twice.

Okay. And so what score was required? And what did you get at that time? Okay. At that time, I got the final score that I got, which was quite qualified, was band 6.5 overall.

That was the band required by the university that I applied for. And at that time, what was your weakest skill? What was the weak point? Okay. You know, my weakest sub skill were speaking and writing.

And this is also, these two skills are also what lots of Chinese candidates are not good at. That's interesting. Why? I mean, I've, I know this is true, because I've got many Chinese students on italki and have had in the past, but I'm curious, why is it, and this kind of comes to one of my questions I was going to ask a bit later, but since you mentioned it now, how is it that for most Chinese, their listening and reading skills are usually considerably better than their writing and speaking skills? Hmm.

Well, I guess this has something to do, has something to do with Chinese students' learning habits when it comes to English. And for lots of Chinese students, when they are in primary, senior high, junior high, senior high, and even in universities, they are kind of like accustomed to listening to something, reading something. They don't, sometimes they don't have the confidence to speak out loud in English with either with their classmates or foreigners.

So I guess this habit might be considered as one of the reasons why they are not really good at productive skills. Well, is it also something to do with the, with how English is taught? Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, and it's not only in China, there's many countries, because I got, I have students worldwide, and in quite a few, like, as we were talking about earlier this week, in Europe, especially Western Europe, language teaching in the schools is pretty good.

So you go to Holland, you can get by in English, some, you know, mostly Germany, you get by in

English, maybe France, depends, but certainly countries like Holland and Belgium, Germany and the Scandinavian parts, you know, most of them, a lot of the young people can speak English because it's a major part of their education, the curriculum. But, so why do you think that's not the case in China then? Well, maybe, I guess, just like what you just mentioned, might be associated with the educational method or the educational system, because when students are young, when they are primary school, junior high, senior high school students, and when they don't have any plans for studying abroad, they are just taught in some traditional ways of learning English in our schools. So speaking is not a, how to say, speaking is not, is not, is not emphasised.

We try to, we are trying to practise our skills more like in the listening and reading skills, because in our entrance examination to universities in China, speaking is not a part which should be focused on. So that's why students prefer to spend a lot of time in listening to different MP3 materials, audios, or sometimes TV programmes, or they prefer to read lots of materials instead of, instead of training their ability in speaking and creative writing or something. Well, how can they practise their spoken English? I mean, well, if you're in a big city like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, or maybe even Wuhan, you'll have lots of English, private English schools, yeah? You know, you'll have like, perhaps not Oriental as they've gone bust, but you know, British Council, English Time, all the other ones, so why, why is it that, so how and why do you think their spoken English is not so good? Well, I guess maybe I'm just talking about the situations for students in parts of China.

I, just as you mentioned, because of the rich educational resources, especially advanced cities like Beijing, Shanghai, or other coastal cities or seaside places, the educational resources for students to, to be exposed to are quite a lot. So they actually, they actually can choose to study in a language school to improve their levels of English, or they go to international schools, international high schools to study the international courses like A-level, IB, or advanced placement. So I think these kinds of course system also provides them good opportunities to be exposed to better English resources of learning.

And also, if you ask me how students in China can improve their spoken language, I think it's more like their personal preferences. Even though I just mentioned a lot of students in those places, like Beijing, Shanghai, these metropolis places, they can have better educational resources, and they can be exposed to a wide range of opportunities to improve their language skill. But still, not every single student likes to study.

So some students who are good at spoken English or written English, they might have great interest or enthusiasm, and they spend a lot of time working on improving them. Actually, I've had quite a few of Chinese here saying that they use chat, GPT, for practising their speaking or similar artificial intelligence applications. What do you think about those? Do you think that they are a good way to practise your speaking? Because I was speaking to a couple.

And it's obvious that, to my mind anyway, these artificial intelligence things are not as good as speaking to an actual person. But what do you think? Okay. I do believe this is one of the ways to improve their language proficiency, at least from the perspective of spoken English, I think.

Siri, which is the artificial intelligence installed in iPhone, right? Yeah, I've heard of it. So when people who use iPhones, we sometimes directly talk with Siri in English. Whether or not Siri can respond to us can reflect how accurate our language is.

I mean, if Siri failed to respond to our instructions, we know that the way we pronounce words are not correct in that way. Well, that sounds good. Yeah.

So tell me about the last time that you took IELTS, because you told me that you got your speaking score, was it 7.5 overall? Or was it 7.5 for the speaking? Well, yeah, the overall score is band 7.5. And for the speaking part also is a 7.5. Yeah. There's a sub-score scale. Sorry, the sub-scale score is the same as the overall score.

Right. Well, that is very good. That is excellent.

So can you tell me, how did you prepare exactly? I mean, do you have a method, a strategy that you could recommend to anybody who's thinking of taking IELTS? Can you tell us about it? Oh, okay. Okay. Preparation plan? Yes, I would like to share some of my experience with you.

I think one of the ways for the speaking part, if you truly want to improve your spoken skill to communicate or to directly talk with native speakers like you, might be one of the ways. So that's why I can be one of the students because I think to talk to a native speaker can keep me active in terms of how to respond to the questions from IELTS speaking. But for different parts of the test like listening and reading, I think being exposed to the listening materials on a daily basis is a must.

So that is also what I almost do on a daily basis. Sometimes I can listen to the BBC documentary. I quite like documentaries, though I can't remember all the contents or detailed information included in documentaries and also podcasts on my smartphones.

I also use podcasts of Apple to train my listening skills. Exposure. Well, yeah, I mean, that's what most people would say.

But what about the reading section? Do you read often in English? I think this is something bothering me. You know, the truth is I want to. I've always wanted to be exposed to authentic materials, but I guess the only excuse, the excuse that I can only find for not doing so is lack of time because I can access to news websites like BBC or any other English websites.

But I think if you really want to improve your reading skills, it takes you a lot of time. But since I'm quite busy every day, I don't think I have that many much patience for doing so. Well, I mean, most examination boards recommend in their guidebooks that we as teachers encourage our students to read as widely as possible.

So reading fiction, nonfiction, blogs, articles, a wide range of that. Authentic, as you said. Now, just to mention, but yeah, so authentic.

Well, just in case anybody watching this doesn't know. So in most of the language classrooms, the material is downgraded. You know, so if you go to a course, you've got elementary books, pre-intermediate books, intermediate books, advanced books or whatever.

But authentic materials are those produced by natives aimed at other natives. You can get graded readers. There's some books, you know, some publishers and websites do this.

They do graded readers. So they have to take a popular story, like maybe Sherlock Holmes. So you can get the up-intermediate version, the intermediate version.

So it's the same story, but we just downgrade the language accordingly for these so-called graded readers. So how much time a day? Perhaps not now, because I know you are very busy at your job, but when you were preparing, how much time a day did you spend on English? Maybe, I guess, one hour or no more than two hours. One or two hours.

Two hours, I guess, that would be my limit. Is that all? Every day? Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. But yeah, but you know, just as you mentioned the reason, because sometimes I'm really, really occupied with the stuff from my work.

So I would like to divide the one hour or two hours into different parts and try to utilise every part of the time, like at noon in the morning or in the afternoon, and the time before I go to bed. So totally within a day, I have one hour or two hours for English learning or preparing for my exams, you know. Do you actually have a, well, you know, not kind of now, but when you were preparing before, did you have a plan, a schedule? Like you just said, so in the morning to get up, you do some reading in the afternoon, you do some listening.

Did you have a plan? Well, I used to have. I used to have a plan, but that was about five years ago or something. Also, at that time, I was preparing for taking the IELTS exam.

So I really wanted to improve my score. So that's why I made a plan, especially for different parts of the test. So I carefully researched all the, how to say, all the past papers included in Cambridge IELTS, you know, the books published by, yes.

So from up to 19, though, there should be number 20 should be coming out in July. Yeah. Yeah.

Yeah. Yeah. Soon.

The 20 should be come out very soon, I guess. So, because I keep saying this also to my other students, I keep getting quick. I was talking to a Russian lady a couple of weeks back and she's like now a student for like time, we have two or three speaking sessions a week.

And she was saying, and it's not just like her, other people too. I was talking to a Czech lady a couple of weeks back. They were all saying, you know, I want to improve my English, but I haven't got time for this.

I can't do this and that this and that. And it turned out that they didn't have a plan. They didn't have any kind of a schedule, a routine.

They were just going into English when they had like 10 minutes here or weeks would go by and they wouldn't do anything. Then they'd come back to English. You know what I mean? So they were coming and going, going and coming.

So they just weren't consistent or regular, which I think is, would you agree that consistency is important in your language learning? Yeah, yeah, absolutely. The consistency, as you mentioned, is without doubt important. It's like, I mean, learning is not really something easy, especially when you are trying to learn a new language.

You have to systematically have a plan for listening, reading, vocabulary, and also squeezing your time for practising all the skills included in the test, without which you would be able to forget about the things you've already learned. And also vocabularies, phrases or idioms or slangs you've learned quickly. So consistency is significantly important.

Okay. Now, just to wrap it up for today, because I know that you have other things to do. Is there any final tips? So if someone were to come to you now and said, right, when I'm taking IELTS test, can you give me some tips? What would your general tips and advice be? Someone who is preparing to take IELTS for the first time, what would your advice be to such a person? Okay.

So if I have to give advice to those people who plan to take the IELTS examination for the very first time, I think the first thing they should do is to be familiarised with the format of the test. Yeah. You have to understand how the test or how the rules are set for this examination, the different types of questions, right? Okay.

Yeah. And then based on the familiarisation of the format of the test, then you can clearly understand how it goes. And then you might want to try to do a mock test in order to figure out or understand the level that you currently have.

And also to see what is a gap between your current level to your targeted level. And then try to find professionals like you who is quite familiar and like an expert in this area to improve any specific subscale of the test. But of course, patience and consistency.

So the first thing is to understand how the actual test works. Yeah. Yeah.

Yeah. The second one is self-assessment or get some assessment so you understand your weak points, et cetera. Yeah.

Is there anything else? I mean, so once they recognise what their weak points are, usually writing and speaking. So what would you advise them after that? So they understand how the test works, they've been through it, they've done a mock test, they've got some idea of what they need to work on. So what would you say they should do at that point? Well, maybe I guess people should work on improving their vocabularies, associated with the usually tested topics in IELTS speaking and the writing part.

Because for the productive skills of these two, you have to memorise lots of vocabularies, phrases, that kind of stuff. And then you would be able to speak at length or write a good writing task. Well, okay.

Well, yeah. Vocabulary is important for sure because we've got all these different themes like we kind of know for the writing section. Environment, education, health, society, transport, is it family, crime, technology, art? There's maybe 20 or so of those topics.

Yeah, I mean, I made a video, if you're watching this on YouTube, I have a video called the Ideas Bank, where I explain how that kind of works. Okay, no problem. No, no, I mean, that's not for you.

If anybody's watching this, they can have a look at it. There's a video called Ideas Bank. Well, thanks for that.

So, when is your next test? Next week. Good luck with that. I hope it works out well.

I'm sure that it will do. Okay, thank you. Thank you so much.

I hope it works out. And thanks for coming today. It's much appreciated.

My pleasure. I hope that other people may get some inspiration from your story. Thank you.

Thank you. Give me a chance to share my stories with other people. Okay, right.

Well, thanks for that. I'll see you later. Okay.

