Hello, my Lovely Learners and welcome to Easy Stories in English, the podcast that will take your English from Okay to Good and from Good to Great. I am Ariel Goodbody, your host for this show. Today's episode is a conversation about my cousin's wedding in Edinburgh, my Japanese exam and tourism in London. As always, the transcript and PDF are available at EasyStoriesInEnglish.com and you can find the link to that in the description.

So yes, as if starting a new job, going to a party in Cambridge and preparing to move to China weren't enough, a few weekends ago, I also took the four-and-a-half hour train from London to Edinburgh, the capital of Scotland, for my cousin's wedding. Now, I talked a lot about weddings last year when there was my sister's wedding. I have a big family. My mum has seven siblings. Well, it's big by European standards, anyway. So I was excited for the wedding, but I was also tired. I was so exhausted going up there and stressed.

So: key context. Edinburgh, when I was growing up, was a popular city for students, but it wasn't this really popular tourist destination. Now, every year, the Edinburgh Fringe, which is part of the Edinburgh Festival, which is this big arts and theatre festival; the Edinburgh Fringe, which is the theatre side of the festival, has grown and grown and grown and is probably one of the most well-known arts and theatre festivals in the world, if not the most well-known.

Alongside that, I think with social media and, to be honest, climate change, Edinburgh has become recognised as a very cool tourist destination to escape the hot weather, to enjoy like a small city environment while still seeing beautiful history and architecture and getting a taste of Scottish history.

All that is to say, when I was a kid and we went to Edinburgh, it was not that busy. But now trying to visit Edinburgh in the summer and book a hotel is a nightmare. The hotels are so expensive, they get snapped up almost immediately, and generally the town is just heaving with tourists.

Now my parents have a camper van, or as they stay in America, an RV, a recreational vehicle. So they decided to drive up and stay in a campsite and they said, well, why don't you join us? You can camp in a one-man tent and then we can, you know, share some space at the campsite. So I decided to do that. I decided to go camping with my parents.

Now the problem with that is, my mindset was: the UK is a small country. We don't have a huge range of biodiversity and changes in climate compared to even say France, but certainly not compared to countries such as America. So, okay, the last few weeks in London, it's been like 25 to 32 degrees. So in Edinburgh it's probably gonna be a lovely balmy but comfortable 23, 22 degrees at the least.

How wrong I was. I went from a sweltering 32 degrees in London to 16 degrees in Edinburgh, and I didn't remember, first of all, I didn't remember how to pack or dress for that kind of weather. It's been months since we've had that coldness here in London, and I couldn't remember, in the middle of a heat wave, like what do you wear when it's cold? Like, what's a hat? What's a scarf? I don't know what these things are.

And I also had forgotten just how different Scottish cold hits, because Edinburgh didn't just have 16 degrees. 16 degrees in London can be pretty warm. It can be pretty close. No, in Edinburgh it's cloudy and it's windy and it's raining. 16 degrees camping in Edinburgh is a different beast. So naturally, I didn't bring enough warm clothes, I panicked when I got there and because I was so stressed, the first thing that happened when I saw my parents was I burst into tears and said, I don't have enough warm clothes! I didn't prepare, I didn't prepare properly. I'm, I'm struggling to get everything ready for China.

I had a little breakdown, I had a little cry, but that was good. I got the stress out and yes, that first night in Edinburgh, oh mama. That first night in Ed- Edinburgh, I was cold because

the wind cut right through my tent. I was lying fully dressed in my sleeping bag, freezing, and I kept waking up in the night from the cold.

So the next day we went out and did some shopping. We bought some warmer clothes, because my parents, after the wedding were going travelling around Scotland, believe it or not, after saying that much about the cold. So, uh, we needed to buy some warm clothes for all of us. So I got a nice big sweater, and that night, the second night, I wore a jumper to bed. I wore my new jumper to bed and I wore this furry woollen hat.

Now, if you listen to last week's episode, this is the hat I wore to King's Affair, the party in Cambridge. So I was literally in my sleeping bag wearing a thick jumper and this woollen hat. I'll just, um, do some ASMR for those of you who can't see.

Hopefully that helps. Uh, I was literally lying in my sleeping bag with a jumper, trousers and a hat on, and I was just warm enough. I was just warm enough. But the other thing is, after weeks of heat waves, my body had finally adapted to the heat in London. So going up and having this cold weather, my body didn't know how to handle it and it really just cut through me.

Now, recently I got this fitness band, it's called WHOOP, like whoop, whoop. Um, my friend gave me his old one 'cause he got a newer model. It's a bit like an Apple Watch or a fitness watch, except it doesn't have a screen. It just tracks your heart rate and strain and all of those metrics, but without distracting you. And it, uh, syncs up to your phone. So it's actually perfect for me 'cause I don't want any of those distractions that come with a smart watch. I just want to track my fitness.

And it was very funny to see, uh, after going to Edinburgh, the temperature of my skin dropped by like two degrees on that first day. But also I slept really well when I was there. I think it was, you know, being in nature and camping. But actually I know that sleeping in a cold environment is very good for you. You're supposed to try and make your bedroom as cold as possible when you go to bed. Well, maybe not as cold as possible, but certainly sleeping in a cooler room is better for you.

So actually, even though I slept quite badly that first night, based on the metrics from my WHOOP, it seems like it did my body a lot of good. Like there's this metric called, uh, heart rate to variability, which is how widely your heart rate varies, like how fast it can go versus how slow it can go. And generally, higher heart rate variability is good because it shows that your heart is healthy and strong. And on the first night, uh, my heart rate variability shot up. Now whether that's necessarily a good thing, I'm not quite sure, but, uh, it seems like it had some kind of positive restful effect on me. So that was good.

So the wedding itself was a Quaker ceremony. So the Quakers are a denomination of Christianity. You might know Quaker Oats, which is a kind of porridge oats that's sold in many countries. And indeed the founder of Quaker Oats was a Quaker, or maybe it was even a group of Quakers. The Quakers are very different. I believe they began in like the 17th century, so they're very recent compared to most Christian denominations.

Quakers basically believe that everyone has divinity, like godliness, within them, and they don't believe in priests, so they don't have this hierarchy of this person is in charge and this person is giving out, you know, marriage and baptism and all those things. It's much more horizontal, much less hierarchical.

So the way that Quaker ceremonies work is, first Quakers do not marry people. The couple writes down that they are getting married and a Quaker witnesses it. They see it and they say, okay, we acknowledge this marriage, but they believe that they don't have the power to kind of create that marriage.

So first of all, there's the signing of the document, and then you sit in silence for about 30 to 40 minutes and anyone can speak if they feel the power of the spirit moving them. So this is, I think, how all Quaker services work. But basically you sit there in silence and then when someone wants to speak, maybe they've prepared something, they just stand up and say it.

So it's quite moving actually, because it's much more, uh, personal than traditional wedding ceremonies. It's really all about the couple. Everyone's saying what they think about the couple, saying nice words. It flows more naturally and you really get to soak in the atmosphere of that room and the feelings. So I actually thought it was a really, really beautiful ceremony.

Then we went over to have dinner in a hall, and the food was very good. We had salmon and uh, lovely vegetables and just really good food generally. And if you've listened to the episode I did about my sister's wedding, you'll probably guess that there was a ceilidh, as in Scottish country dancing, and indeed there was a ceilidh at the wedding, but I missed it. Unfortunately, I had to leave early on the Saturday night because the next day on Sunday in London, I had a Japanese exam.

So as I've mentioned before, before I got the job in China, I was planning on moving to Japan. So I booked this Japanese exam because I thought having this certificate would help my application for Japan, and then I ended up getting the job in China. So I decided, well, I've paid for the exam, I might as well do it.

Now this is the highest level of the JLPT, the Japanese Language Proficiency Test. I've done levels three and two before. There are five levels. So level one is the highest level. And I actually did it before about 14 years ago, and I did not pass that time, obviously, or I wouldn't be sitting it again.

In fact, the reason I didn't pass that time, mm, was a bit silly. I had worked really hard for that exam, but I didn't think my chances of passing were very high. I maybe had like a 30 or 40% chance of passing, but on the day I completely sabotaged myself by drinking way too much water. And then when you start the exam, they say, if you leave the exam room during the exam, you will be disqualified. You will get zero points. And I was like, okay. But halfway through the reading test, which is two hours long, I had to pee and I had to pee really, really badly. Like I had to pee so bad, I was bending over the desk, rocking backwards and forwards, and I decided, you know what? If the choice is between definitely failing this exam, which I'm probably going to fail anyway, or wetting myself in front of a room of people, I would rather fail the exam.

So I asked if I could go to the toilet. And they said, but you, you can't leave the room. And I was like, I don't care. I don't want to wet myself. So eventually they did let me go to the toilet. One of them followed me there. Obviously they didn't watch me pee. But they were making sure that I wasn't cheating, and I came back and it seemed like they weren't going to disqualify me, but I had basically already failed by that point anyway, because I had lost so many nerves to the whole toilet situation.

So in a way, just like going to Cambridge, going to this ball in Cambridge that I talked about before, helped me process some of my feelings around my degree, uh, redoing this Japanese exam was an attempt to help process the trauma of this exam. Because, to be honest, and I'm aware that this sounds really obnoxious, when I failed that Japanese exam, it was pretty much the first time I had done badly at anything language related. Like it was the first time I had failed a language exam. It was the first time I had really failed an exam in that way, and I was maybe like 17 or 18, no, maybe like 18 or 19 at the time. But it hit me really hard. Like it sounds stupid, but I wasn't used to failing, or at least I wasn't used to

failing exams. Like I've always been fine with exams. I don't get stressed about exams. I'm always that person who finishes an hour early and asks to leave.

So in a way, this was good to just kind of help close that loop. I've been kind of going back and revisiting a lot of emotions related to stuff in my past 10, 15 years of life, and it felt like something good to do, something to kind of close off before I move to China and start this new chapter.

Anyway, the exam took place at SOAS, the School of Oriental and African Studies, which is a university in London, and this time they seem to have changed the rule about going to the toilet. Now it looks like you can go to the toilet, but they had introduced a new rule, which is, before the exam starts, you have to turn off your phone. You have to show to the examiner that you've turned off your phone. You have to put your phone in your bag, and in the break between the reading exam and the listening exam, if you get your phone out, even though you're not in the exam room, you will be disqualified.

I mean, it was like so, so, so strict. I was very surprised. So you really were not allowed to use your phone whatsoever. Which, to be honest, I think is a good thing. But this being Japanese bureaucracy, they had to explain this rule in excruciating detail and repeat it about 10 times. So, you know, it, it, it added a bit of, um, boring admin to the exam.

Now this exam, the Japanese Language Proficiency Test, as language exams go, it's, it's not a very good one, um, in the sense that it's just reading, grammar, vocabulary, and listening. There's no speaking and there's no writing. As far as I can tell, they do this because it saves them money. Also with writing, it's a lot more complicated with Japanese because you can speak Japanese fluently but not be able to write kanji, the Chinese characters that are in Japanese.

So I think they avoid that kind of issue by just not having it in the exam. But the result is the reading exam is way harder to kind of like compensate for these other sections missing. So at this level of the test, you are having to read like academic texts, scientific texts, extracts from novels. To be honest, it's not that different from like C2 exams in other languages, but it's, it's hard, like it's really hard.

So the pass rate of this level of the exam, the percentage of students who pass, is about 32%. So you have about a one-in-three chance of passing. And in the room I was in, I would say 60 to 70% of the students were Asian, most of whom were probably Chinese. Because it's way easier for Chinese people to learn Japanese to a high level because of the shared writing elements. So just being there and being able to do the test was very reassuring. I was like, no, like it's really impressive that I can do this.

The last time I did the JLPT level one, I was studying using quite traditional methods. I was just doing endless flashcards and I was watching lots of anime, but I wasn't really reading any books and, yeah, as a result, I really wasn't prepared for the exam. The only way you can really pass this level of the exam is if you're reading fluently in Japanese, which I do. I read novels in Japanese and I read some non-fiction leading up to the exam.

But for the previous levels, I had just studied with traditional methods and it got me there. But there was a point around level two where I just passed that exam, but I really started to feel like, what's going on, and actually that used to always be how I felt when I was studying languages where I could study using traditional methods and I could get to like upper intermediate. but then I would hit a wall or a plateau as it's often called, where I just couldn't progress. And now of course I know that the way to really learn a language is with comprehensible input. And especially at those higher levels, you really need to be reading and listening a lot.

So this time, I may pass, I may not pass. I really don't know. The results come out in September. You need about a 60%, uh, score to pass. You have to have a minimum of 19 out of 60 points in each section. The problem is it's very hard to know what the scores actually mean because they use like a graded scoring system. So essentially they look at all the results from people who did the exam and the questions that lots of people got wrong are worth more points and the questions that lots of people got right are worth less points.

I think? I don't, it's, it's some really confusing system. Theoretically, this statistical method ensures that passing the exam reflects an actual ability to speak Japanese rather than just guessing or having memorized a bunch of grammar points. Whether that works in practice, I'm not really sure. When I did the practice tests, I got usually between 62 and 75%. You know, I was technically within the passing range, but based on the scores, I don't really know.

So before the exam I wasn't feeling that confident, but when I was actually doing the exam, I was like, I can read these texts and understand them. Right? And that's kind of the shibboleth.

A shibboleth is like a, a test of like, can you really do something? Well, technically a shibboleth is a bit different. So basically, shibboleth is a word in Hebrew, I think, and a long, long, long, long, long, long time ago, there were these two groups and they were fighting, they were at war. So in order to find out which group someone was from, you asked them to pronounce the word 'shibboleth', and whether they said 'sibboleth' or 'shibboleth' helped you know which group they were from because they had different accents. So shibboleth is a word we use to talk about this kind of, uh, tool to distinguish, you know, so does someone pass or fail? Does someone fit in or not?

So, I feel like the fact that I could actually read the texts and understand them, not on a purely mechanical level, but like actually appreciate what the author was saying, the fact that I could comfortably listen to the listening section, means that even if I fail, I've kind of passed, if that makes sense. But I don't know. I felt pretty confident actually, uh, on the day of the exam.

Now for the reading section, the person on my left was shaking his foot the entire time and his shoe was squeaking, so that was really distracting, 'cause the whole time through the test, it was like right next to me. But I did ask him to tone it down in the listening, and he did. So that's good. So if I fail, I can just blame that Italian guy.

But yeah, I have to say I enjoyed doing the exam, which I really wasn't expecting. As I was preparing for it, what really surprised me was how difficult I found it to sit down and do a practice test. As I said, I'm usually a person who's really good at exams, but obviously since I graduated university I haven't been doing exams, so I'm very much out of the habit. And at first I found that I really struggled to finish the tests in time. I was reading too slowly. I didn't know the right test techniques, the methods. Now the JLPT skews pretty heavily on the side of understanding the structure of the test and the techniques to use versus actual language ability. So part of it was just kind of acclimatising to the structure of the exam, like getting used to how the exam works again.

But, um, I dunno, I found it really helpful because I, I struggled to concentrate at first, but then I really got into that exam mode. And although I think exams are fundamentally a pretty terrible way of measuring someone's ability in a language, I can't deny that there's a huge sense of accomplishment in doing a language exam and succeeding and, I don't know, going through that process, it does give you like a meaningful definition of like, this is my ability, whereas if you just learn a language without ever being examined or evaluated, it's kind of hard to feel like this is where I am.

Like recently several people have asked me, aside from English, what is your strongest language? And I don't really know if I can answer that. Like I guess technically Japanese because that's the one I've worked on the most recently and I can read the most kind of heady academic stuff in, but then I can also read pretty difficult stuff in German. I feel quite conversationally fluent in French. I feel very conversationally fluent in Spanish, but maybe I don't have as many like literary references in Spanish as I do in German, for example. I used to feel way more comfortable speaking in Esperanto than any other language, pretty much, 'cause I was using it a lot with friends, but it's kind of fallen out of use. So anyway, what I'm trying to say is like, it gives you a milestone. It gives you like a, a marker of like, this is where you are.

So I, I enjoyed doing the exam. It also felt really good to be in an academic space again, like to be sitting in a university. I've struggled a lot in the past few years with my feelings about academia and like, do I want to do a master's? And as I've mentioned, regrets around my studies and dropping out. But I really felt like, no, I like being here. I'm really good at this. And with post-grad studies I've told myself a lot, like, I'm not good enough. I don't deserve this. What's the point of doing this when it's so hard to get into academia now? It's so expensive, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. But I really had a sense in this exam of like, I want this. I want more of this.

Now, what structure that will take, I don't know. Maybe that means I do more language exams for my other languages. Like maybe I set the goal of like, I'm gonna do C2 in French, Spanish, German. I'm gonna do the equivalent highest level of the Chinese test, because that would be really satisfying, right? To be able to say like, hey, this is proof that I am highly proficient in all these languages. That could be one goal.

Or maybe I go and do a master's. That's something I've thought about a lot and I think the difficult issue there is how much do I look for something that's really gonna give me, you know, like a stable and sustainable career and how much do I follow my passions? And in a way I kind of feel like maybe I just wanna follow the passions. I dunno, it's, it's a really big topic.

I was watching like a YouTube video by, uh, HealthyGamerGG, who's this YouTube psychologist, and he was talking about this concept of the puer aeternus. Puer aeternus, maybe? It's Latin for the 'eternal child' or the 'eternal boy'. Right? And it's a concept that the sociologist/psychologist Jung came up with, but it's like a kind of person who never grows up. Another word for this is, um, Peter Pan syndrome, right? Like Peter Pan never grows up.

I've thought about it with regards to myself because what he said in this video really struck a chord with me. Like I was like, that's me. Which is this idea of the puer aeternus has huge potential, a lot of skills, a lot of ability, but it's like they're standing in the middle of this path with loads of options in front of them. Like they could go down all of these different paths and they're all really interesting routes, but they never want to commit. They never want to choose an option that removes other options. So if they go down a path for a bit, they'll always come back or they'll quit or whatever.

And I really see this in myself. I studied a year of Chinese at Oxford and then I dropped out. I went and did linguistics at university, and then I really struggled and I couldn't fit in academically, and then I was like, I'm never going into academia. And then I worked on trying to be a romance novelist and then I burned out on that and I was like, okay, nevermind, I'll be a teacher and I'm gonna focus on this.

And to be honest, I think the last, yeah, the last 10 years of my life has really been a struggle to overcome this puer aeternus, this Peter Pan syndrome and commit to things and the things I have committed to, I feel, are my teaching and Easy Stories in English.

Easy Stories in English is easily the most sustainable project I've done. It's the project I've done that's lasted the longest. It's almost seven years now. It's about six and a half years, and just the fact that I've committed to that and kept doing it all this time is hugely important for me as a person. It's obviously good for my career.

But basically I guess what I'm realising is: you can be really, really good at something or you can work really hard at something for a long time. But alone, these things probably aren't enough. Or rather, if you work really hard at something for a long time, even if you're not amazing at it, or even if other things are holding you back, you will have some kind of success. If you're just really good at something but you can't commit to it, that's going to really limit you. Right? And that's the problem. I've done that thing of I'm really good at this, I'm really good at that. And then very rarely do I like fully commit to it. And of course, if you commit to a career as a teacher, a career in academia, if I commit to writing for Easy Stories in English over writing a novel for myself, you know, it's removing options. You have to remove a lot of possibilities in order to commit to things.

And I've spent most of my life playing around, right? Like, I'm gonna do a bit of stand-up, I'm gonna make a video game, I'm gonna write a novel, I'm gonna do this. And this is good, and this is fun, and this is useful for my personal and artistic development. But the time has come where I'm like, okay, I just need to sit down and do the damn work, because I'm 32 and there are people my age who have been steadily earning in jobs since they were 18 or 21, or there are people my age who have done PhDs and are now going into careers in academia.

So I am going to have to work hard. I'm going to have to just buckle down and work hard and focus in order to catch up because I'm tired of being in this path with all these options. I want to be walking down the path with a clear idea of where I'm going.

Now, to be fair, I still don't really know which path that is. Um, and of course I still will try and do five at once because that's just sort of who I am.

Doing this Japanese exam is allowing me to close this loop. It's allowing me to continue this trajectory from way younger, right? As a teenager, I did level three and then level two. So if I pass level one, it's like I'm completing that quest. I'm finishing that story, right? And similarly by going to China, I'm completing the quest from my first time at university. The first time I went to university, I studied Chinese at Oxford for one year. The second year would've been my year abroad in Beijing. So my friend who I actually studied Chinese with all the way back when in 2011, she even said to me, oh, it's like you're doing the year abroad, but like 14 years later.

And that feels really good. Like I, I feel like I'm giving myself such a powerful gift because for so long I told myself, it's too late. You don't deserve this. You had your chance and you missed it. And now I kind of feel like I can do anything. I can do anything I put my mind to, but I have to make decisions that will limit me because that's life. And of course, the more decisions you make that limit you, the more specific you get with your goals and your way of living. Although it cuts out options, it also gives you like a beautiful depth, right? It gives you a feeling of satisfaction and completion that you won't have otherwise.

Wow, this has all got very deep. Um, I didn't anticipate this at all when recording this episode, but I think this just goes to show how doing this Japanese exam, even though I technically didn't need to do it, right? Like it, it, it really had no effect on my trajectory in going to China. It's been really good for me personally, and even if I fail it, it's given me a huge sense of accomplishment and purpose.

So I really feel like I'm going to China with this very, well, not a clear vision. I'm going to China knowing that it's, it's what my past self deserves. I'm giving that gift to my inner child,

whatever you want to call it, and I'm challenging myself. Just as I've been challenging myself with moving to London, doing this exam and so on, right? I'm challenging myself and whatever happens after that, I'll just have to wait and see. There's going to be many opportunities. I'm going to pursue different projects while I'm there, but ultimately, I can't see that far down the path. It's still quite dark and foggy in the distance, but I know when I get there it's going to be gorgeous and hopefully there won't be a big bad wolf who eats me up! Or maybe I might like that... awoo!

Anyway on that rather heady and psychological note, if you enjoyed this episode, please leave a review or a rating on whatever podcast platform you are on, and if you're feeling generous and want to help me out on my way to China, you can buy me a coffee. Go to the transcript at EasyStoriesInEnglish.com. Click the link in the description, and at the bottom of the transcript you will find an orange button that says buy me a coffee and then you can chuck me $3, which actually, hmm, if I open my currency converter, which I have, you know, pounds, euros, Chinese yuan, uh, because hello, she's an international woman.

$3 is £2.22. Can you get a coffee for £2.20 in London? I feel like I've seen it, but it's very rare, so get me half a coffee. Or at least, I don't know, a croissant, how about that? I much prefer a croissant to a coffee. Send me $3 and I can buy myself a croissant and I can enjoy that beautiful, flaky, buttery pastry because I won't be having any croissants in China. Or at least I don't think they'll be so common.

Alright, bye!