

Feel Good English

An Interview with Fluency MC - English through Rhythm and Rhyme



The transcript to the interview

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Kevin Conwell: So, here I am with Jason, the Fluency MC, the Hip-Hop English Teacher. How are you doing, Jason? What's up?

Jason Levine: I'm doing well. Thanks a lot, Kevin.

Kevin: Thank you for being here. Where are you right now in this big, wide world?

Jason: I'm traveling south in Italy down to the "boot" (of) Italy to a school there. I'm giving a student workshop tomorrow. I've been traveling this week to meet with English students in big groups to practice English—music and videos I made.

Kevin: Really cool! So, you travel around Europe, sharing your English-teaching style. Is that what you do?

Jason: Yeah, I'm really lucky to have this opportunity. And I've been doing it more often now closer to home. I live in Paris with my family. So I've been doing more work in France and Belgium, so I can try to, you know, leave in the morning and come back at night if I can.

Kevin: Sure! So, it doesn't sound like, being in the boot of Italy, you're going to **make it home** tonight?

Jason: No. I mean, it's really exciting for me to travel like this, but it can be tough on my family.

Kevin: So, tell me about yourself. You're a very unique English teacher, I'd say. And that's why I really wanted to connect with you.

When did you get started with English teaching? So two questions: when did you get started, and how did that go into you having this very cool style of teaching English through rapping and teaching English through music?

Jason: Well, I started teaching English in 1998 in New York City. I taught immigrants, foreign students. And from the beginning, I like teaching with music. I think most language teachers enjoy using music in the classroom. But I didn't start writing my own songs until about a decade later. What inspired me were several things:

Well, first, more than anything else, I was a hip-hop DJ. I grew up with this. So being able to take the passion I have for hip-hop and connecting it with the passion I have for English teaching, it's obvious.

But actually, what really inspired me more than that was the need for my students to get repetitive practice with the target language from the lessons, because you know, the biggest problem that I face—and I think every English teacher faces—is how to get that into the students' head so that they're able to use it—use it in activities and also in the real world.

So, how to do that repetitive practice in a way that's interesting, motivating, inspiring them to want to do more, I thought, I my students learn quickly through songs...

And then, a lot of things started connecting. “Oh, I know hip-hop music from New York City where hip-hop started and thrives.”

And also, hip-hop is truly international. My students whether they were from Russia, Turkey, Brazil, Korea. They all knew this music. They all knew this culture. And their teacher is a DJ, so I thought, “Hey, I can do this.”

Kevin: Sure! And I think, like you said, one of the hardest things is to get students **to grasp** this concept of “repetition.” You need to see the same thing over and over.

And in practice, it’s actually not that hard. One thing I find a lot is a lot of students think you have to live in another country, you have to live in an English-speaking country to really get good at the language, but I totally disagree with that. If you can find ways to make the language repetitive in your day and being consistent with it, hearing the same things over and over—

Because when you’re living in a country, learning that language that the country speaks, basically, what you’re doing is you’re hearing the same things over and over and over, which helps you pick that up, and then you get to practice a lot. But there’s tons of repetition just naturally when you live in a foreign country, learning a foreign language.

So, what you’re doing is creating these kind of, almost immersion techniques by bringing out the music and letting people have this method of making English real in their lives.

Jason: I love the way you said that, about it being like immersion. Because, actually, what you just said, there were many things that it made me think of.

One thing is, you're right, living in another country is not necessarily going to make it happen for you. And one of the reasons is—you mentioned that if you are immersed in English in this country, you will get some repetitive practice.

But in fact, what happens more often is people think this will happen, they go to another country. And what happens is outside it's input that's too difficult, and they're *not* getting enough repetitive practice.

Irregular verbs are a good example. That's my most popular song in video.

So, when you're a child and your first language is English, then you're getting enough repetitive input and practice. But if you're living as a young adult or an adult in another country, you're *not* going to get the types of repetitive input and practice as a regular person because it's going to be in the context of language that's difficult most of the time.

So, what I'm doing—some people say, “Well, Fluency MC song is not natural because we don't say I *take, took, taken the bus.*” That's right, you don't. The point is a native speaker, if you go up to a native speaker, *take, took, taken, bring, _____, _____, oh! bring, brought, brought* because it's stored up in our head.

And that's what I'm trying to do for students, those lists, gerunds, infinitives, adjective + prepositions or whatever it is. Those lists that we have in our heads when we need to use them, but they're there to access. That can't come from just studying and repeating a list.

So, rhythm and rhyme, as you've mentioned, helps so much in our retention and vocabulary. And we're motivated to repeat

songs. What's funny is—and I agree with you, of course—it's not natural, it's boring to repeat things; but songs, we repeat.

In this way, what I'm doing is nothing new. People had been using this approach forever of learning through song and music. I think what's different is you know, pop songs, hip-hop songs can be that same problem of being too difficult. At the same time, songs in textbooks, unless you're talking about little children, songs in textbooks can be **childish** and boring for older learners.

So, that's where, you know I came in with this idea of writing a song that an adolescent or adult will want to repeat naturally—not because they've been told they have to repeat it.

Kevin: Right! So, go through a typical session. You travel around Europe, you're giving these workshops. Can you kinda explain how this would work? So let's say you've arrived into a classroom or into an auditorium. What goes down?

Jason: Yeah! So, it's generally auditoriums. It's usually big groups, a minimum of a hundred, sometimes up to 300 even or depending on the size of the auditorium, the theatre.

And it's really a show, an interactive show. It's very interactive. I would say the best way to imagine it is more like a comedian almost who's going into the audience and going back and forth with people. But we've also interspersed with videos and songs by getting students to “repeat after me” or “repeat after me in the video.”

I'm not the only person who's had this success on YouTube doing this in different areas. It's like I'm able to do this because I recognize people students have seen the video. And so it's kind of like trying to inspire them.

They're already sort of inspired, luckily, from media. and I how I kind of exploit that to promote these feelings that I have.

Kevin: Do you get nervous before a presentation?

Jason: Not at all, but I used to. My God!

Kevin: Yeah.

Jason: This is such an important topic I actually for your podcast, that idea of self-confidence and getting out there in front of people using language, presenting ideas in front of people. I mean, it was really difficult at first. And just the size of the groups—to do it with a big group—I was nervous... but excited too! Now, I'm just super excited.

Kevin: So, what kept you going? It was hard at the beginning. It was difficult in the beginning this big group of hundreds of little eyes looking up at you in a foreign land. What kept you going to get through those difficult times?

Jason: Actually, students and teachers there are so into it, and being able to make mistakes and feel like I'm learning from them—and not making mistakes that are so bad they don't like what I'm doing, but realizing ways to make it better. And of course, that motivates me to keep going. And then, trying out a new idea, having success with it really, really feels good.

And the other thing—I think this will interest your listeners—is I get students to come up and rap, dance during the show. But I don't do it by pressure. I basically say, "Anybody here break dance? Anybody raps? Anybody beat box?" And because hip-hop is so international, there's always somebody. There's always somebody who raps. There's also somebody who break dances.

There's always somebody who beatboxes.

Some of them are reluctant to come up. Occasionally, someone will be like, "Yeah!" and they'll come up. But usually, it's like, "Yeah, I do it, but I'm not sure." And so we all try to help them feel more comfortable, get them up there. And then, later, they're really happy they did. They're putting pictures on social media. It inspired them more. So that also helps me feel confident.

Kevin: Hearing you speak here, I'm thinking more and more how important it is, what you're doing.

One of the things I think is the biggest struggle or I think is the biggest obstacle for language-learners around the world is thinking that English is just another school subject that they have to learn and study. And unless they love it—which most people don't just like most people don't love mathematics (some do, but it's a very small percentage). Most people don't love English. If you can bring this in and put a whole new twist on what language is, and you make it fun, and you bring in emotions, you can change their mindset about what they're doing.

And that, to me, is one of the most valuable things an English teacher can do. I think that's just so great!

So, yeah, cheers to you, man. I think that's wonderful.

Jason: Well, thank you so much, Kevin.

I mean, I'll say that at schools in general, I noticed what you're talking about. They look at it more like a subject. It's not something that they're excited about.

But I also see some students who are. And in almost every case,

it's not the traditional reason. The traditional reason was, you know, **they're in to** America or England, the cultural aspect. But what I see now—and I'm so excited—they're motivated because it was just becoming more of a world language, they see it as a way to communicate not with Americans or British or Australian people or whatever or they'll move to another country. That's not their goal. It's more they want to understand the songs. They want to be part of the world that social media is connecting. It's just a very practical skill. And that tremendously inspires me, to see that happening.

Kevin: Totally!

Jason: At the same time, as I've said, there are students who do not feel that way. And the reason they don't feel that way to me is very clear. If you have three hours of English a week in the classroom, then of course you're going to think about it as a subject.

So, the important thing for me when I do these workshops, when I teach online, whatever I'm doing with English, is that I try to help students practice out of class. And when I say "practice," I don't mean a conversation partner. How can they learn do more with songs, blog and podcasts like yours? How can they get that kind of practice that they're more interested in. It's not just the subject, but as a way that help and connect it.

Kevin: And how I look at it is to open up their world and open up their minds. And these days, it's just the way the world works. We do this online through English. English, I think, is like 80% of the Internet or something like that.

So you're talking a huge world out there that is current and is

what we have. And to be able to **tap into** that, to be able to connect with that, you just have to know English these days.

So, that's been my inspiration as well, bringing the world to people and helping them become more self-aware and finding what they like and what inspires them and what's interesting to them. And if they can do that through English-learning, which basically means you know, just finding content and finding things that makes them who they are, which often is in English, that's my goal. That's my objective. And it sounds like you're on the same path.

Kevin: I think so. And I don't know if you've talked about this before in your show. If you haven't, I'm sure you will be a lot—the whole idea of identity. If you speak another language, learning about other cultures, this is a way—it's kind of like acting—it's a way to experiment and figure out things about your identity.

You don't have to stop being who you are in your first language and culture. On the contrary, you're stepping outside of that in a way that can be very liberating and very inspiring. So it's way beyond just the language-learning at that point, and I think identity development.

And I think what I see happening with English, it's being less about going to the States or Britain or learning about American sports or something, or British customs or something. That's not what these students are interested in. Yeah, I'm American. Sometimes, they have questions about it. But they're not so excited about me being American. They're excited about being able to understand English with me and being able to have this interaction in this language. That, to me, is really exciting.

Kevin: I ask my guests on the show to share something that they struggle with in their lives currently. It could be through business. It could be through life. We all go through difficulties. And if we can figure out ways to get over these difficulties and **persevere** and learn strategies and connect with other people that have been through what we've been through, we can always just keep moving forward.

So, Jason, is there something now in your life that's kind of creating a bit of a struggle with you?

Jason: Yeah! It's really been tough being **on the road** a lot as exciting as it is to go to schools, and rewarding professionally. Trying to balance family life back in Paris has been tough. It's getting a little bit easier as I'm getting more work closer to home. But for me, what's hard is I love spending time with my wife and kids. It's not that I can't control working more. It's just when I work, I get too obsessed. I'm a workaholic.

I like to think in a positive way. I get a lot of energy from the creative side of it. But sometimes, it could be hard for me to know when to stop and how to balance the time I have.

Kevin: Sure, so, do you have any ideas on how you can create more of a balance between work and family life?

Jason: Yeah! I do, I do. I've learned the hard way in the last year. But I would say needing to, number one—and this is true of any problem—recognize that it is a problem. So, for a while, the really hard thing was I didn't notice how much of a problem it was.

Once I was more aware of what was going on, how to balance it, a lot of communication, opening communication especially with my wife, not being afraid to act, "Am I working too much?"

And really, I'm having to remind myself the limits of being in social media and scheduling things, being able to say *no* if somebody asks you to do something.

Kevin: Right! Yeah, that's something we often have to work on, is the ability to say no to people, say no to projects.

Jason: Mm-hmmm...

Kevin: But like you said, recognition is the first step, seeing that you are *not* where you want to be. And then, with time, figuring out how that could work. Maybe in a few years, you can start a whole rap group with your family and you guys can travel around as a full performance group.

I really appreciate you being here, and doing something that can really connect us all around the world. You're doing something that is so valuable. And I thank you for being here.

So, people listening to this, where can they find you online and find more about what you're doing?

Jason: First of all, Kevin, thank you for the kind words. I really think that you and others making podcasts that are helping English-learners through topics and subjects that are just more intrinsically interesting is so valuable. So I'm really glad we could connect.

And yeah, for your listeners, the easiest thing is www.FluenceMC.com. I have a website which is just my name, FluencyMC.com. From there, just all the social media. Please connect with me on YouTube, if you like to subscribe to channels, subscribe. Facebook page, Instagram, I'm there a lot. But the website, the website will be the best place. And also,

there, there's a contact form which is just a direct email to me. I respond to every email I get, especially from English learners and teachers too.

So, yeah, please reach out, anybody who's interested. It would be great to meet some of your listeners, your followers.

Kevin: Awesome man, and thanks again. Keep moving along. We will talk again soon.

Jason: Oh, I hope so, man. Thank you for this chance to be here.

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