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Module 1 - Who's Pete?

G'day, guys, and welcome to the very first module. Module number one of the Aussie English Academy.

So, today, I want to tell you my story, a little bit about my history, where I grew up, you know, and what it was like growing up, and then obviously, how and why I started Aussie English. You know, I thought this would be the sort of best place to begin, starting from scratch, to just introduce you to Aussie English the Academy.

So, anyway, my name is Peter Smissen. I am of European heritage and my family's been in Australia for, I think, the majority of my ancestors were in Australia for at least three or four generations. They all came over from Great Britain and, you know, England, Scotland, there's some Irish in there, and I think there's a little bit of Germanic



as well. But we're about as WASPy as it gets, right? I think that's 'White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant', so Caucasian.

So, I was born in a town called Ferntree Gully in 1987. So, I was an 80s child, although, not for very long, only for three years. And I grew up in a small town called Kallista.

Now, Kallista is located in the Dandenong Ranges in Victoria, Australia. So, that is the sort of mountain range to the east of Melbourne in Victoria. Lots of really, really tall gum trees. It's very wet forest, it's sort of temperate forest. So, it's not a rainforest, because it's in the south east of Australia. The rainforests tend to be further north.

But there was always a lot of life growing up. I remember always being in the backyard, chasing animals, lifting up rocks, looking for lizards and scorpions and, you know, seeing marsupials and possums, all sorts of animals around. So, it was kind of really cool growing up for the first nine years of my life in Kallista. There were lots of parrots, lots of cool birds like cockatoos and rosellas there as well. I went to primary school there. It was just a really cool sort of beginning to my life.

When I was, I think, nine years old, my parents decided to move to a town called Ocean Grove, which was about two hours away from the Dandenongs. And this was on the coast, so near a city called Geelong. And this is because my mum ended up getting a job as a lecturer at Deakin University.

So, Both my parents met at Melbourne University in Victoria and they were both biologists, marine biologists who studied marine wildlife. And my mum ended up finishing... well, they both did their Honours degrees there. They both started their PhDs, but then they ended up getting jobs. My dad was a high school teacher for the first part of my life and then went off into other areas of education. And my mom ended up working for Melbourne Uni originally, and then, she got a job at Deakin University in Geelong being a biology lecturer.



So, we moved down to Ocean Grove. I then went to primary school there. It was a sea change, we call it, when you move from anywhere that isn't the ocean to the ocean. And initially, I remember it being sort of a... something I didn't really want to do because I had all my friends at primary school and I didn't know, you know, this new location. I'd have to start from the beginning, start from scratch all over again, making friends, everything like that. So, it was a little tumultuous to begin with. But, you know, we ended up getting into the swing of things and really enjoying life in Ocean Grove.

And so I spent all of my the primary school years there after moving. And then, I went to a high school called Geelong College in Geelong. It was a bit of a snobby, posh high school. But, you know, take it for what it's worth. That's where I ended up going to high school. It sort of definitely gave me a good perspective on things, you know, especially the sort of class divide in Australia.

And so, throughout high school, I started studying things like biology, because my parents obviously loved biology, and I spent a lot of time at the beach, you know, doing things like surfing or going to places where there were tide pools looking for animals, you know, trying to find snails and crabs and fish. Sometimes I'd go fishing.

So, I always loved animals. You know, we would go camping and there was just always wildlife around, right? We were always sort of in nature. So it was a good sort of upbringing. I really enjoyed it.

So, yeah, I went to high school, started studying things like biology, also sort of fell in love with learning languages. And I started studying French when I was 13 and then I started doing Chinese Mandarin as well when I was 14. I gave up Mandarin because it was just really, really difficult. And it was going to be hard to get a really good score in year 12 and allow me to sort of get into university. So, I get French going, though.



Once I finished high school, I ended up getting an okay score at the end of my high school enough to get into Melbourne University where I decided to do, you guessed it, science and follow in the footsteps of my parents study the same thing there at the same university. I was studying biology, particularly marine biology. I even got told by some of the people that my parents went to university with, so that was interesting.

And then after my undergraduate degree, I decided that I wanted to keep going, and it became one of those things where once you finish an undergraduate degree in anything, especially biology, they tend to be sort of limited options for where you can go career wise. I mean, there are a lot of options, but they don't tend to be very well-paying jobs. So, a lot of the jobs that scientists would want to get, they say, you know, you need to have an honours degree or a Master's degree or a PhD, right, a doctorate. And so, you end up going back to university and studying more and more and more to get more and more qualified to then hopefully be able to, you know, get the job of your dreams.

So, I decided that I was going to do a Master's degree, and I did that in the evolutionary biology of lace monitors. So, that is a species of native Australian Varanus. So, Varanus is the genus for goannas, native Australian goannas, I should say. And these are the biggest ones that we have in Australia that climb trees. They are closely related to Komodo dragons. And my supervisor for my Master's was someone who was studying Komodo dragons and doing a lot of the landscape genetics and population genetics of Varanus varius, the lace monitor, the tree goanna.

So, effectively, for those of you who don't know, landscape genetics is looking at the genetics of a group of animals from one species across a landscape, right? So, it could be a mountain range or, you know, just an area with a river through it. It could be any kind of area. And based on the genetics and how these individuals are related to one another, you can see how the landscape has affected movement of those individuals across the landscape. So, if there's a mountain range on the landscape, is that blocking individuals on one side, getting to the other side?



So, I effectively studied the tree goanna and collected genetic samples from all the way across its range. So, its entire distribution for the species, which goes from the north of Australia all the way down to the southeast of Australia, and then over to Adelaide in South Australia. So, really, really big distribution. And I then looked at how these different animals were related to one another and then try and work out where the barriers between populations. So, are they, you know, unable to get over mountain ranges, rivers, different habitats that are drier or wetter?

So that was what I was interested in for my Master's degree in understanding how populations were connected and which populations may need to be protected. All those sorts of questions.

Once I finished my Master's, I realised that I probably wasn't going to get a job unless I did a PhD. So then, I decided to do a PhD in a similar area where I was studying this time the evolutionary origins of Australia's native rats. So I look... I was looking at a really large group, the largest group in Australia, this *Pseudomys* species group, which included, you know, dozens of different native Australian rats, and trying to work out how the different species within that group were related to one another.

So, there were species that were from the rainforest, from the desert, from the monsoon tropics in the north of Australia, all the way down to Tasmania. From the Alps, in the mountains, from the lowlands near the coastline. Loads and loads of different species of rats in Australia. And the thing that I was interested in was understanding when rats got to Australia, how and why did they get into different environments, right? So, how do you end up with a species that lives in the rainforest and a species that lives in the desert, but they're closely related?

You know, you kind of like, how did... Did they originate in the desert and then move into the rainforest? And how did they do that? Did they originate in the rainforest and move



into the desert? How and why did they do that? So, my entire PhD, six years of my life was looking at Australian rats and trying to work out how they were related to one another, how they moved into these different environments, which way they moved. Did they come from the desert? Did they go into the rainforest or vice versa?

And also, a big part of what I was looking at was museum specimens of extinct species of Australian rats and trying to get DNA out of the bones and skins and, you know, other parts of the specimens that have been collected 100, 200 years ago, and then seeing if we could get DNA out to be able to use in these studies. Because this sort of stuff was really important for being able to understand past collections that had been, you know, collected of species that might be extinct or populations that might be extinct, effectively trying to come up with a better method for extracting DNA out of the resources that museums have, right? Because then it allows you to look at extinct species and populations that were collected in the past so that you can compare them to the present and try and just get a better understanding of what's going on.

So that was my PhD. Whilst I was doing my PhD, I needed something else, right, outside of the PhD to keep myself sane so that I didn't go crazy, because I'm sure a lot of you, you know, at university and studying, I'm sure you know what it's like when that's all you do. Effectively, I was on a scholarship and doing my PhD, and it would be go to the museum or go to the university every single day, read 10 papers, do some lab work, go home, sleep, repeat.

And so, it got pretty boring pretty quickly. And I needed something to kind of mix it up. I wanted to do something else. I was also trying to get fit at the time because I'd come out of a relationship where I just, you know, I'd gotten overweight, I wanted to feel better about myself, so was walking a lot, was running a lot, started going to the gym and decided I wanted to learn to use my body for a sport, for something besides just going to the gym and getting fit.



So, I was looking into different options and decided, you know what, I might try and my gym, you know, I did martial arts like karate and Taekwondo when I was a kid. I wondered what would it be like to do something like MMA, mixed martial arts, you know, as an older adult. So, I ended up going to a gym in the Melbourne CBD called 'Absolute MMA' and signed up and tried the my class, really liked it, but the best part of the class was the jiu jitsu, the Brazilian jiu jitsu. I really like the grappling in the submissions and the takedowns. So, within a few weeks I was hooked, I was addicted to Brazilian jujitsu and those were the classes that I was going to.

So, I just started doing Brazilian jujitsu. I was doing No Gi and I was doing Gi. And, you know, throughout my PhD, I got up to the point of, you know, training after studying each day for probably four o'clock until eight o'clock at night, so, several hours, five days a week, I was going to the gym, training, hanging out with my mates, everything like that. Lots of fun.

Now, the reason I bring this up is because when I started doing this, I started meeting a lot more people from overseas. So, I mean, I had friends at university from overseas, but a lot of the people who ended up doing science and were studying biology were Australians.

When I started doing the martial arts, there were people from Singapore, from China, from Germany, from France, from Norway, all over the world. You know, there were probably more people from overseas than there were Australians at the gym. My coach was Brazilian. So, I was surrounded by people who are bilingual. Some of them were even tri- or quadlingual, right? They spoke three, four languages, and that was just the norm, that was normal to them.

Whereas for me, I was just a monolingual speaker and a little bit embarrassed about that because, you know, I was just jealous. They could speak all these languages. And I had sort of done a little bit at high school, but never really followed through with it.



I'd never really gotten fluent in Japanese, Indonesian, French, Chinese, all the languages that I'd done throughout primary school and high school. Even though I had studied French for a total of six years at high school, I was really only basic conversational kind of level.

So, I ended up deciding, you know what, screw this, I'm going to pick up French again and I'm going to study in my own time. I'm not going to do traditional classes. I'm going to use online resources, because now we had, you know, courses online, websites, podcasts, YouTube videos, all sorts of stuff. Because this would have been 2012-2013.

So, I just dove in and was learning all this stuff online. I was using flashcard systems like ANKI, so space repetition systems to practise sentences and phrases and learn expressions and vocabulary. I was listening to podcasts every single day. You know, I would leave the house, I would be listening to one as I walk to work. I would listen to one whilst I was working in the lab. I'd listen to one whilst I was on lunch break. I would listen to one walking to the gym, and then training at the gym if I'm doing weights, and then walking home or on the tram. So, I was listening, listening, listening and studying a lot.

And within about six months, I had reached basic fluency. You know, I was going to meet ups, the French meet-ups where we could meet French people and speak in French. And I realised after, you know, all this time, I was meeting a lot of people who didn't speak English. You know, they'd just arrived in Australia, but I could converse with them. I could talk to them about things in French. And that was just mind-blowing. Right?

So, I had been listening to this podcast called 'Français Authentique', which means 'authentic French' in English and absolutely loved it. You know, the host was called Johan. He would talk about his life. He would share a self-help kind of tips and advice



whilst also talking about French culture and history and the French language. And absolutely, it helped 100 percent in not just learning French, but understanding the culture, understanding the history, as well as learning about myself and the self-improvement stuff that he shared was really interesting.

So, it was just... It was an amazing experience. I would go back to the gym frequently and be chatting to some of my French friends there. And they would always be like, how did you learn French? You know, not to toot my own horn, right? To play my own trumpet, to talk myself up, to say that I'm really good to boast. But I would be talking to them and they would notice the improvements that I was making in French.

So, I told them, you know, I'm listening to this podcast, I'm going to these meet ups, these language meet ups and speaking in French as much as I can. Are you doing the same thing for English? And I remember them telling me quite often that they didn't know of any good English podcasts.

I'd had a little bit of experience in the past doing podcasts when I was an undergraduate student, because I'd been on a science podcast, and so I sort of knew how to create them. So I decided, you know what, I'm going to try and do this, because they were having all sorts of trouble, not just with English, but Australian English. They wanted to learn slang. They wanted to understand the history, the culture, the news and current affairs. They wanted to understand more about what it was to be Australia, to be in Australia more so than just basic English.

So, I went away and that was pretty much it. The first episode I ever recorded I was in a park called 'Royal Park', which is behind the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne. It's this huge grass park. And I remember walking in there one day with a... I think just my phone, to be honest, and recording like this and just introducing myself, who I was, that I was studying a PhD at the time. And then I wanted to create a podcast to help people learn Australian English culture, history, all that sort of stuff.



So, when you go back and listen to that episode, you know, number one, two, and three, you'll probably hear how much younger I sound and how much... How much different I sound on the microphone. I was definitely a little more nervous and unsure of myself, and obviously, didn't have the experience that I have today.

So, that's how we got started. I kept doing this, you know, just for free. I was just creating content and putting it out there for people to use and download as audio content on the podcast. I then started the YouTube channel and it just kept sort of gaining momentum. You know, more and more people were listening to it. They would message me and say that they... It was helping them and that they were really enjoying the content.

And then, eventually, it got to the point where someone said, well, why don't you try and monetise? Why don't you try and earn an income from this? You know, how can you use this to make a crust to earn a crust, right, to make a living from so that you could do this full time? Because you're just giving away all this content and you're going to have to get a job anyway to live. Do you want to be a scientist and do this on the side if you can do it? Or do you want to do this full time?

And so, that was coming up, the end of my PhD was sort of coming up. And then, there was Aussie English that was getting better and better and bigger and bigger. And I just had to make that decision pretty quickly.

As this was happening, I ended up meeting my wife, well my wife today, right? I didn't meet her and she was my wife. I met her and she wasn't my wife at the time. But I met my to-be-wife Raquel on YouTube. She commented on one of my videos saying, you know, I'm from Brazil. The Video was great. I speak Portuguese. If you speak English, do you want to trade languages some time? Because by this point I was learning Portuguese after I'd learnt French.



So, we ended up just hitting it off. I was chatting to her on Instagram and we were practising languages and just got along like a house on fire. Right. We were having an amazing time just chatting to one another. It just felt natural, like we've been friends forever. And, you know, the rest is history.

Fast-forward a few months. She was in Townsville at the time. She came down to Melbourne. She was going to say a friend. And we ended up spending the entire week together. She went back to Townsville and pretty much decided, you know, I'm going to move to Melbourne and we'll see where this goes.

So, she ended up moving down to Melbourne for a month over Christmas that year. This was 2017. Got to know my family, everything like that. And then, I think, went back for the last time to sort of pack her things up. And then, the interesting thing happened where she ended up seeing a job opportunity in Canberra and applying for it.

So, she flew down to Canberra to go to this job interview and I drove up to Canberra to stay with her for the few days that we were going to be there for this job interview over the weekend. She ends up getting the job, and so we decided to move to Canberra. And we were there for six months or so before we had some issues with her visa and had to sort of say goodbye because the embassy wasn't going to cover the visa that she needed. They weren't going to pay for it. They didn't have the money. So, we had to find something else so she could stay in the country.

We moved back to Melbourne. She started studying. And as a result of finishing in Canberra, we decided to work towards having our first child and getting married. So, before leaving for Canberra, I had decided at the end of my PhD, I'm going to give this a go, this Aussie English thing ago for, you know, a year or two, and we'll see how it goes. You know, hopefully, I can turn this into a full time job.



And whilst we were in Canberra, we were, you know, both earning about the same amount of money and then it just ended up taking off. I never ended up having to try and find another job and get back into science. So, that's where we are today, guys.

I'm currently happily married, living in a town called 'Curlewis', which is near my parents in Ocean Grove where I grew up. I've got two beautiful children. So, Noah I just turned two today, actually. He turned two today. Happy birthday, Noah. And my daughter Joana is three and a half months... No... What would you be? Yeah, three and a half months old. Three months and a couple of weeks.

So, it's definitely been a stressful part of of life. But this is where we currently are. That's sort of the history in a nutshell of me and Aussie English. And it's probably a good place to stop, guys.

But hopefully, you enjoyed this first module. I hope we can talk in the comments below. Be sure to leave a comment. Tell me about you, where you're from, and how you ended up wanting to learn Australian English. Right? Introduce yourself, use some of the vocab you've learnt from this video and this module, and I'll chat to you there. See ya!