

Greetings, everyone! My name is Laurence and this is *English in Practice*!

## MUSIC

Welcome to the third episode of *English in Practice*. Our protagonist on this occasion is none other than Michelle Obama – lawyer, writer, and, of course, First Lady of the United States from 2009-2017. The interview excerpt I have chosen today is a little shorter than usual, but I personally find it inspirational. Hopefully, you shall as well.

Before we start, I'd like to read out a message that I recently received from Zahra Hadi, who was kind enough to give me feedback on the podcast. Here's a shortened version of the email she sent me:

*Hello Laurence!*

*My name is Zahra. I'm from Iran but have been living in Dubai (UAE) for more than 10 years. I've already decided to follow your podcast, as I think it is gonna be really helpful for me, because both my daughters study in British schools and English is easier for them to speak than Persian (our mother tongue), and I feel like I should improve my English in order to communicate better with them as well as with their teachers and friends.*

*I think choosing interviewees with different accents will be of great help to people like myself who live in cosmopolitan cities and struggle to understand native speakers from different cultures (especially if your kid's teacher is Scottish!). Also, I liked your podcast because you were not speaking fast, your explanations and examples were totally clear and your voice was calm.*

*I hope this feedback serves as a bit of help and motivation.*

*Thank you so much for your time and your podcast.*

*Good luck!*

*Regards*

*Zahra*

Thank you very much yourself, Zahra, and may I say that your English is already excellent. Remember, you don't have to worry about making mistakes when you write in, because I will make any necessary corrections if I am going to read out your message, as I have

done here. Also, there's nothing wrong with making mistakes. For anyone unfamiliar with international schools, it is not uncommon for pupils of these schools to feel more comfortable speaking English than their mother tongue. And trust me, Zahra, I know just how difficult it can be to understand the Scottish accent.

As I have already mentioned before, it pleases me immensely to hear from my listeners, and I'm always keen to know how I could improve – after all, I'm very new to podcasting. I'm not sure, perhaps you think I speak too much in the podcast, use terms that are too specialist, etc. Please let me know what you think, or simply get in contact as Zahra has, because it's much nicer to hear from listeners than to try and gauge how people find the podcast based on the stats alone.

I would also like to thank the latest people to like the 'English in Practice' Facebook page. They are: Zahra Hadi, Kyoko Kawaguchi, whom I believe is Japanese, though she now studies in London, Abderrahmane Meriem, whom I think is from Morocco, April from Myanmar, and Siddhanta Goswami from India. Likes and comments go a long way, so please take the time to help me out with these if possible.

If you would like to send me a message, then you have two options. The best is by emailing me using the following address: [englishinpracticepodcast@gmail.com](mailto:englishinpracticepodcast@gmail.com). Otherwise, you can contact me through the Facebook page, 'English in Practice: A Podcast for Intermediate-Advanced Learners.'

For those who wish to download the transcript, simply visit my website: [www.jamesfable.com](http://www.jamesfable.com). James Fable is my penname; my real name is Laurence. I highly recommend downloading the transcript, especially if you are struggling to understand everything I am saying.

That's enough self-advertising for now. Let's learn about the protagonist of today's episode: Michelle Obama!

**MUSIC**

Michelle Obama was born on January 17<sup>th</sup>, 1964, which makes her 56 years of age. She was raised on the South Side of Chicago, in the state of Illinois, and was the daughter of Fraser Robinson III, who was a city water plant employee, and Marian Shields Robinson, who worked as a secretary at a catalogue store. Her paternal great-great grandfather was born into slavery in South Carolina; however, her extended family has said that people did not talk about the slavery era while they were growing up.

In a talk she gave to students in Atlanta, Michelle Obama recalled that her childhood was greatly affected by her father, who suffered from multiple sclerosis, which is a chronic nervous disorder. He wished for her above all to stay out of trouble at school and be a good pupil, which is exactly what she was. Even though some of her teachers told her not to set her sights too high and not to apply to top universities, Michelle Obama secured a place at the prestigious Princeton University, where she studied Sociology with African-American studies.

Unfortunately, life at university would not be all that simple for her. In fact, Michelle Obama says it was at Princeton that she first became more aware of her ethnicity. In her own words, she felt 'like a visitor on campus', like she didn't belong there, and the mother of one of her white roommates reputedly tried to get her transferred to another room because of her race, because she was African-American.

These experiences seem to have damaged Michelle Obama's confidence during her undergraduate degree, and biographers write that she struggled with the question of whether she could remain part of the black community while belonging to an intellectual elite. However, she answered this question herself by getting into Harvard Law School for a postgraduate degree. In the words of her faculty mentor, this is the moment when Michelle Obama concluded that she could be (quote) 'both brilliant and black.'

In the early stages of her career as a lawyer, Michelle Obama worked for the law firm Sidley Austen, which is where she met Barack Obama. According to Barack, the two were attracted to each other because they were opposites, because they were different to each other, and the couple married in 1992. After suffering a miscarriage, Michelle underwent in vitro fertilisation, and by 2001 the Obamas had two daughters, Malia and Natasha.

Of course, life changed dramatically for the Obamas in 2009, when Barack won the US Presidency and Michelle became the first African-American First Lady of the United States. During her eight years in the White House, Michelle particularly championed LGBT rights and sought to reduce childhood obesity. She also made it a personal mission to support military families and was decorated with numerous awards. She continues to be a source of inspiration and admiration for many millions today.

The following interview excerpt comes from *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, from 2018. Until now, Stephen Colbert has mostly been asking Michelle Obama questions related to her book, *Becoming*, which was a bestseller. However, the audio clip you are about to hear is Michelle Obama's response to the interviewer's final question, namely: 'What would you like to be remembered for?'

**'For bringing hope to young people, because, in the end, that's who we're counting on.'**

**'People ask, is it, you know – do you still believe in going high? Absolutely, because what's the choice? What – what do we want to model for our kids? You know, we want them to believe in the possibility of more and better.'**

**'And we – we owe it to them, because kids don't come to this earth jaded and racist and cynical and misogynist; they come here pure and open. We teach them all of that stuff. We owe them better.'**

**'So, yeah, I – I wanna have a legacy of... of making the next generation better than... than we are.'**

An inspiring lady, I'm sure you'll agree. Hopefully, Michelle Obama was also relatively easy to understand, for she speaks clearly and at a fairly slow pace, as Americans tend to. She does, however, use a few words and phrases that you don't hear all that often – such as 'going high' and 'jaded' – so don't worry if you have not understood everything she has said – that's why I'm here.

Wonderful. Without further ado, let's analyse the first fragment:

**'For bringing hope to young people, because, in the end, that's who we're counting on.'**

*'For bringing hope to young people, because, in the end, that's who we're counting on.'*

Good. There are just two points that I'd like to comment on here, the first of which is a grammatical one. Michelle Obama says that she would like to be remembered 'for bringing hope to young people.' This grammatical structure of *preposition + gerund* is very common in English. In some languages, such as Spanish, the infinitive follows a preposition. But remember that in English we need a gerund; that is, a noun which ends in -ing and has been formed from the verb. In this instance we have *for bringing*, but let me give you a few more examples of the preposition plus the gerund:

'The businessperson tried to avoid paying income tax *by opening* bank accounts abroad.' Here, we have the preposition *by* plus the gerund *opening*. This structure of *by + gerund* denotes the *means* by which something is done, *how* something is done.

Another example: '*Since converting* to Buddhism, Richard has felt more at ease with himself.' On this occasion we have the preposition *since* plus the gerund *converting*, which denotes *temporality*; that is, *when* something was done. You could rephrase this sentence to read: 'Ever since Richard converted to Buddhism, he has felt more at ease with himself.'

To summarise then, we have just covered three examples of the gerund plus the preposition, namely:

*For + gerund*

*By + gerund* = which denotes the *means* by which something is done

And: *since + gerund* = which denotes *temporality*, *when* something was done

There are, of course, other examples, but I think you get the picture.

The second point I would like to make refers to the last part of Michelle Obama's sentence, when she says that it is the young people who we are counting on. This verb, *to count on*, is a synonym for 'to rely on,' though more colloquial.

Let me give you some examples. 'We are counting on the weather being good tomorrow, because we have a barbecue planned.' In other words, 'We are relying on it being sunny tomorrow, because we have planned to have a barbecue.' Another example: 'I'm counting on Lara to remember the house keys, because I've lost mine.' That means: 'I am relying on Lara to remember the house keys, because I have lost mine and will be locked out otherwise.' Hopefully that's clear.

Michelle Obama will explain why we are counting on the young people later, so let's move on to the second fragment:

**'People ask, is it, you know – do you still believe in going high? Absolutely, because what's the choice? What – what do we want to model for our kids? You know, we want them to believe in the possibility of more and better.'**

*'People ask, is it, you know – do you still believe in going high? Absolutely, because what's the choice? What – what do we want to model for our kids? You know, we want them to believe in the possibility of more and better.'*

Lovely. So, Michelle Obama relates how people ask if she still believes in 'going high.' This is a colloquial, informal, way of saying 'aiming high'; in other words, people ask her: 'Do you still believe in aiming high?' Presumably, this refers to the manner in which we raise our children, to the beliefs and behaviour we wish for them to aspire to, such as gender equality, putting an end to racism, etc. However, this idea of aiming high may also be an allusion to the policies that Michelle Obama and her husband promoted while they were living in the White House. After all, some of their policies, especially in the realm of health care and climate politics, were quite progressive, some might say ambitious. You could say, they aimed high with their politics.

And what is Michelle Obama's answer to the question of whether she believes in aiming high, of going? It is 'absolutely', of course. Her reason for this affirmative answer is that she sees no other choice; in other words, you have to aim for the best, you cannot settle for anything less.

Michelle Obama conveys this idea by asking, 'Because what's the choice?' This is a *rhetorical question*; that is, a question which does not require a response, usually because the answer is obvious, self-explanatory. Let me give you another example. Before the next fragment I will ask, 'Shall we listen to the next fragment?' That is a rhetorical question, because I am going to play the next fragment, no matter how you answer. You'll see.

Now, Michelle Obama's rhetorical question leads nicely into her next question: 'What do we want to model for our kids?' The noun model has various meanings, as you may be aware; in fact, the Merriam-Webster dictionary lists thirteen different definitions. In this instance, Michelle Obama is referring to the idea of *role models*. A role model is someone whose behaviour is worthy of being emulated, imitated, copied. For example, politicians should try to be role models, because they are in charge of running the country; politicians are constantly in the public eye, in the media, and so many people will decide what is or isn't acceptable based on what politicians say and the ways in which they behave. Sadly, politicians very often prove to be poor role models, but let's not head down that dangerous road.

Anyway, when Michelle Obama speaks about what we wish to model for our kids, she is referring to the sort of role models that we wish to be for them. If we, for example, accept racism in society, then our children are more likely to accept such racism when they grow up. Obviously, that is not what we want. Instead, we want our children 'to believe in the possibility of more and better,' as Michelle Obama says. That is, we want our children to believe that life can be better, that we can create a more equal world, that we could live in a society of greater and better opportunities. Therefore, we must act as role models, we must try and model this sort of world for them.

So, shall we listen to the next fragment? Here it comes:

**‘And we – we owe it to them, because kids don’t come to this earth jaded and racist and cynical and misogynist; they come here pure and open. We teach them all of that stuff. We owe them better.’**

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Good. This is perhaps the crux of Michelle Obama’s answer. Building on what she said in the last fragment, the former first lady explains that we ‘owe’ our children the possibility of believing in more and better. This verb, *owe*, denotes obligation; it is a synonym of ‘to be indebted’ and we often use it in a monetary sense. For example, ‘My brother lent me some money last week, so now I owe him.’ I am indebted to him. That means, I have to give him that money back, I am under obligation to return that money to him.

The reason we owe the next generation in a moral sense, explains Michelle Obama, is that ‘kids don’t come to this earth jaded and racist and cynical and misogynist; they come here pure and open.’

Let’s start with the adjective *jaded*. This is a rather refined way of saying fed up or tired of something, perhaps from having seen too much of it. For example, if consecutive governments promise a rise in salaries, in wages, but they all fail to deliver, then the public might become jaded. That would mean the public is tired of hearing these promises made time and again and them not coming true. Perhaps many people will even stop voting, having lost faith in the government’s commitment to making improvements.

Another example: ‘I’m jaded with my partner’s promises of fidelity. I know for a fact that he’s seeing someone else.’ In other words, ‘I’m fed up and tired of my boyfriend promising that he will be faithful, because I know that he has been cheating on me.’ Hopefully, none of you are feeling jaded with my explanations right now.

Okay, I expect you know what racist means, so we’ll move straight on to *cynical*. This adjective originally comes from the cynics, ancient Greek philosophers who sought virtue

and happiness in life partly by rejecting social conventions, social norms, such as of behaviour and dress. For example, Diogenes, who is the best-known and probably the most extreme cynic, is supposed to have lived in a large jar, masturbated in public and excreted in the theatre.

Today, however, cynicism refers to something quite different. If you are a cynic, then you distrust other people's motives, other people's reasons for behaving as they do. Cynics may have little faith in humanity, believing that humans act primarily out of selfishness. For example, many people are cynical of the promises of large energy companies to go green, to produce more renewable energy, because these companies tend to care more about making money than protecting the planet. I personally am cynical of certain politicians who claim that they want to do the best for the country, because often it seems that they actually just wish to further their careers. Apparently, people with a high level of cynicism are three times more likely to develop dementia later in life, so I guess the future looks bleak for me.

Anyway, Michelle Obama also says that we are not born *misogynist*, that kids do not come to this earth *misogynistic*, which is an alternative form of the adjective. Now, a misogynist is someone who hates women and is sexist against women. A misogynist might claim, for example, that women are less intelligent or do not deserve to earn equal wages.

So, how do children come to this earth? According to M-Michelle Obama, excuse me, they come 'pure and open'. A synonym for *pure* would be *untainted*, which in this instance is similar to *innocent*. And when we speak of someone being *open*, we mean that they are willing to learn and perhaps try new things. Children are especially open because they do not yet have much life experience and therefore have fewer opinions on certain topics, such as race. You may have heard of the *nature vs nurture* debate; that is, whether humans behave as they do by nature, meaning they are born that way, or whether it is the influence of society that makes them behave as they do. We can safely say that Michelle Obama falls on the nurture side of this debate, for she believes that children come to this earth open, malleable, receptive to outside influence. For this reason, she considers it paramount, which means extremely important, to educate them in what we believe to be morally correct.

Unfortunately, it is the opposite that is currently happening, at least according to Michelle Obama. She says that ‘we teach them all of that stuff’, meaning that we teach children to be jaded, racist, cynical, and misogynist. By *we*, she means society, not every individual, of course. In other words, there is too much jadedness, racism, cynicism, and misogyny in society, and it rubs off on the younger generations. They grow up to have these vices, these moral flaws, because we teach them to be that way. Instead, society must teach children to reject these vices and aspire to a better way of living – or, as the former first lady puts it, ‘we owe them better.’

She concludes this idea in the fourth and final fragment:

**‘So, yeah, I – I wanna have a legacy of... of making the next generation better than... than we are.’**

*‘So, yeah, I – I wanna have a legacy of... of making the next generation better than... than we are.’*

An admirable and ambitious legacy indeed. Let’s start with the word ‘wanna’. This is a colloquial way of saying ‘want to’, though you are more likely to hear people from the USA say this than British people. For example, ‘I don’t wanna go to work today’ simply means ‘I do not want to go to work today.’

Now, I imagine some of you are wondering what *legacy* means. Well, a legacy is something left or transmitted by a predecessor; it can be material or immaterial. For example, lots of people would say the legacy of European colonialism is racial inequality and civil war, for many former colonies are now rife with these things. Another example: ‘Shakespeare’s plays are his greatest legacy;’ that is, Shakespeare is remembered above all for his plays. Although he also wrote love poems, or sonnets, we remember him mostly for his plays, for his dramatical works.

Related to this primary meaning, legacy can also be a synonym for *bequest*, which is the gift left by someone in their will, especially when this is a gift of money or personal

property. For example, ‘the duke died last month and has left his children a legacy of two million pounds.’

So, Michelle Obama says that she would like to be remembered first and foremost for making the next generation better than our own. That is the legacy she would like to leave. We can say that she believes strongly in the idea of moral progress, that she believes our children can grow up to be more virtuous than we are. Some philosophers would disagree with her, but I can tell you that the crowd cheered very loudly after she said this.

Excellent. That concludes the analysis. Let’s listen to the whole interview excerpt again, so that you can check your progress. Here we go:

**‘For bringing hope to young people, because, in the end, that’s who we’re counting on.**

**‘People ask, is it, you know – do you still believe in going high? Absolutely, because what’s the choice? What – what do we want to model for our kids? You know, we want them to believe in the possibility of more and better.**

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**‘So, yeah, I – I wanna have a legacy of... of making the next generation better than... than we are.’**

I’m not sure what my legacy will be – probably not anything quite as significant as making the next generation better than our own – but with any luck this podcast will leave a legacy of having improved a few people’s English. And yes, in case you are new to the podcast, I do end most episodes on a slightly corny joke.

As mentioned at the beginning, please do get in contact to let me know a bit about yourself and to leave any feedback. Once again, the email address is

[englishinpracticepodcast@gmail.com](mailto:englishinpracticepodcast@gmail.com), and the Facebook page is ‘English in Practice: A Podcast for Intermediate-Advanced Learners.’ If you have enjoyed the podcast or found it helpful, please do tell your friends about it, share the Facebook page, etc. Please also remember to subscribe, for it helps me out a lot.

If you would like to watch the whole interview with Michelle Obama, you can find the link at the bottom of the transcript. There you will also find the link to the Facebook page of *Se Habla Español*, the podcast from Felipe Galán.

That’s all from me for today. I hope you have enjoyed this episode of *English in Practice*. Look out for a bonus episode next week, and for another interview episode the week after. All the best. Over and out.

Watch the whole interview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jXwaQXquA7E>

*Se Habla Español*: <https://www.facebook.com/sehablaespanolpodcast/>