

Why languages matter to me!

The British have always had a poor reputation for learning languages – and it's getting worse. The number of UK students studying a language at university continues to fall, and most schoolchildren take advantage of the fact that they can drop foreign languages at 14. Is this not understandable, though? Why would any Brit want to spend countless hours struggling to learn a language when most of the world is keen to speak English to them?

Here, two high-profile British language learners explain how learning a language has enriched their lives, and what sparked their passion for learning languages.

The comedian: Eddie Izzard



Fact file

- Born 1962, Yemen.
- Popular British stand-up comedian.
- Often tours abroad, and has been performing in other languages since 2011.

I describe my language ability in percentages of fluency. I'm about 65% fluent in French, 30% fluent in German, and about half a percent fluent in Spanish. I'm already touring my show in French in France, and after that I'll be doing it in Spanish, then Russian, then Arabic.



They say if you have French and English you should be speaking Spanish pretty well after a month of deep immersion. If I get stuck with a word or a phrase during a show I ask the audience, 'How do you say such and such', and they help out.

I don't find languages easy, but I have a hunger to learn. When you can speak another language, you go from being a person in an adult's body pointing at things like a child, to being able to communicate with people like an adult again.

There's a political basis for me to learn other languages because if we don't come together in the world, then the world's not going to make it. There's a business case, too – I'm beginning to turn a profit on my foreign shows. Plus, no stand-up has done this before, so there's also the fun, bloody adventure of it.

The wildlife expert: Chris Packham



Fact file

- Born 1961, England.
- Nature photographer and author, well known in the UK as a presenter on popular TV wildlife shows.
- Has a house in France.

In France, where I have a house, it's quite remote and none of my neighbours spoke any English. I rocked up ten years ago and had no more ability in French than being able to go to Paris and survive a weekend. I bought some CDs, but learning it that way didn't work for me, so I had to think of a plan B.



I bought some wildlife books at a local bookshop and because I understood the context, I was able to read them cover to cover and grasp some of what they were saying. Then I said to my neighbours: 'Look, I'll speak to you in French and I want you to constantly correct me. I won't be offended.' And they were great, they did.

I do find it quite difficult. If I was living in the language all the time, I'd get on top of it and it would stick. The longest stint I've had there has been three months, and by the end of that I was thinking in French and putting sentences together in a French way, and it felt really good.

What's brilliant is that I can meet up with my neighbours now and have a laugh with them. They'll gossip with me, whereas before it would have been quite formal and polite. So you feel much more a part of things. People have been extraordinarily welcoming and are appreciative of the fact that I've made the effort to converse with them.

Glossary

gossip (v) talk about other people's private lives

grasp (v) understand

offended (adj) upset

rock up (phr v) arrive

stint (n) period of time