

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.

A photograph of comedian Eddie Izzard performing on stage. He is wearing a dark pinstriped suit jacket over a white shirt and a red tie. He is holding a microphone in his right hand and gesturing with his left hand. The background is a blue wall with a map of Europe and the word "Bonjour" in white text. The word "LO" is partially visible in yellow text above the map.

Bonjour

LO

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

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

- **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.**

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

Read the text again and answer the questions with **Eddie, Chris, or both**.

- 1 Who finds learning languages difficult?
- 2 Who has tried different ways of learning a language?
- 3 Who is expecting it to be easier to learn another language? Why?
- 4 Who is using languages to do something very original?
- 5 Who has used what he does for a living to help him learn a language?
- 6 Who says he feels immature when he can't speak a language?

- 7 Who wishes he could spend more time speaking the language? Why?
- 8 Who has learned the language by doing something other than speaking?
- 9 Who asks native speakers of the language to help him improve? How?
- 10 Who says that people treat him differently now he can speak their language? How?

Meaning from context

1 Do you know what these words mean? *Don't* look in a dictionary!

- trace
- settle
- flawless
- abruptly

2 These sentences all contain the nonsense word *uggy*. In which sentence is *uggy* used as: a **verb**, an **adjective**, a **noun**, or an **adverb**?

- 1 Anne's piano playing was *uggy* – she didn't get a single note wrong.
- 2 After moving around between many different countries, we decided to *uggy* in Canada, and bought a house there.
- 3 It came as a shock when the play ended so *uggily* – I wasn't expecting it to end there.
- 4 Mario's English is so good you could almost think he *was* English, but sometimes you can hear *uggies* of an Italian accent.

Can you guess what *uggy* means in the four sentences? Which of the words in exercise 1 go into each sentence?

1 International student



A formal letter

University of
WEST LONDON

Apartment 25,
Lac de Lemman Building,
Geneva,
Switzerland

Dear Mr Elliot,

We have pleasure in offering you a place at the University of West London to study for a Master's degree (MSc) in Applied Biochemistry. The academic year commences on 10 October and classes start ...


An informal letter

Apartment 25,
Lac de Lemman Building,
Geneva, جنيف
Switzerland

email simon.elliott@gen.com

Dear John,

Just writing to let you know that I've got a place at West London University to do my MSc! So, I'm finally coming back to London. I'm really looking forward to seeing you again. I'm not sure where I'll be living. I'm applying for accommodation with a host family – that way I won't have to cook! I just hope that there's a vegetarian family available. As soon as I know my new address, I'll email or ring you, and we can meet! Do you like the photos I've sent? Do you remember ...



Application From



*Please print.
Use black or blue ink only.
Tick (✓) the relevant boxes.*

Application for Accommodation طلب اقامة

Family name Elliot

First name(s) _____

Male/Female (Delete as appropriate) **Single** **Married**

Children Yes No Number

Date of birth / / Nationality _____

Passport/ID number _____

Home address _____

Postcode _____ Country _____

Course title _____

Course start date / /

Type of accommodation

Host family
 University hall of residence
 Shared house

Special diet Yes No
Please specify:

READING Going abroad to study

1 Personal information often appears on documents, especially official documents. Use the ideas in the box to say what personal information is on ... ?

- a birth certificate
- a bank statement
- a driving licence
- an exam certificate

name	date of birth	address	parents' names
grades	driver number	account number	
name of school or university	place of birth		

2 Simon Elliot lives in Geneva, Switzerland. He is returning to the UK to study. Answer the questions.

1 Label the documents. Which is ... ?

- a passport
- a formal letter
- an informal letter
- an application form

2 Where is Simon going?

3 What is he going to study?

4 Who is John?