

Hands up who remembers Del Boy from the sitcom *Only Fools and Horses* and his cringeworthy comic mulling of *la langue française*. If you've never seen his toe-curling “*bonnet-de-douche*”, “*mange-tout*” or “*au-contrain*” – all used out of context of course – well, all you need know is that it was a feat of satirical TV gold exposing the home truth that native English speakers don't always have – ahem – the best reputation when it comes to mastering foreign languages.

There are countless exceptions of course, but among those who never bought in to language learning, it's not generally over-confidence that characterises the attitude to language but plain old defeatism, especially it seems, as we get older. Comments along the lines of “The whole world speaks our language, so why learn another?” really aren't all that unusual.

BUT HEY, IT'S NOT OUR FAULT

Quite frankly, I think we should be forgiven for linguistic inertia. Anglophones aren't overwhelmingly monolingual because we're inherently lazy but because our history and culture have shaped us that way. I blame everything from colonialism to a lack of Modern Foreign Languages funding in schools, but that's another story....

But what does it matter if we only speak English anyway? Well, on a global level, an epidemic of monolingualism means we become disconnected linguistic islands with all the socio-political issues that that implies, while on a personal level it means we often have such an irrational fear of trying out language in situ, that there's a barrier not only to functional day-to-day communication but also to enjoyment of that country's culture.

Worse still, did you know that preventing the brain from reaching its linguistic potential could mean we're missing out on a massive health-related bonus too?

THE SCIENCE BIT

We're all aware that with medical advances, the new age of ageing is taking us further than ever before into our eighth and ninth decades (and the wrinkly beyond), but while we're all doing the maximum to make our bodies hold out as

long as possible, it's easy to forget we need to nurture a healthy brain to inhabit it too.

And here's why you might want to do just that by learning a language, explains languages expert Cate Hamilton.

“Our brains have evolved to juggle multilingualism easily, and neuroscientific research has made several leaps of late to demonstrate that even if you're getting on a bit, language learning is one of the best all-round forms of mental gymnastics available. Learning a language builds cognitive reserves like a huge pension fund and steers us towards the most functional long-term life possible.”

“And Sudoku's great,” corroborates Thomas Bak, neuroscientist at the University of Edinburgh, “but it's like going to the gym and only exercising on one machine. Language learning lights up every part of the brain, so it's like going on all of the machines at the gym – the full brain workout.”

FRENCH IN FRANCE

Of course, if you're moving to France – or have already done so – then learning the language becomes something of a necessity rather than a brain-boosting hobby. And yes, it's challenging, but it's



Gift OF THE gab

We should all be a little less anxious about learning a language, says **Lucy Shrimpton** as she examines the science behind the benefits and shares some practical advice on how to learn French

8 WAYS to learn a language

DIGITAL

- Smartphone/tablet apps – try **Duolingo**
- A vlog a day – try **commeunefrancaise.com**
- Podcasts – try **newsinslowfrench.com**
- Audiobook French lessons – try **Pimsleur**

HUMAN CONTACT

- French lessons – try **your local college**
- Language buddies – try **mylanguageexchange.com**
- Immersion – try **twinning, exchanging or homestay**
- Travelling in France – try a B&B stay where you can learn French, such as Ferme des Isles in Normandy

Did you know?

Research shows that among those who speak more than one language there's a later onset of Alzheimer's disease and the potential to recover from a stroke at double the rate of a monolingual person

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also self-satisfying, empowering, and even addictive. But how to begin? Well, everyone has a different approach and there is no wrong way.

Start by thinking about what type of learner you are and how much time you can commit. And ensure the approach you take is something you can dip into regularly to keep the language momentum moving. You'll most likely choose to take a combined approach.

Find out more about the science of language-learning on Cate Hamilton's podcast thelanguagerevolution.co.uk

WHY IT'S NEVER TOO LATE TO START LEARNING A LANGUAGE

Keith Van Sickle, aged 60, owns a home in Bouches-du-Rhône and is the author of *Are We French Yet?*



“My wife and I had previously been expats in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, where we learned a smattering of the language but no more. We had missed a big opportunity in Switzerland. Yes, we had hiked in the Alps and gone to all the village events, but we were only able to skim the surface of society because we hadn't learned French. It felt as if we were separated from the real Switzerland by a pane of glass.

About 10 years ago, we decided to move from Switzerland to France. This time, we wanted to immerse ourselves properly, to understand the culture and to meet all kinds of French people, not just the ones who happened to speak English. More than anything, we wanted to make France a real home.

A friend introduced us to the idea of language partners. For us, this was the key that really opened the door to French language learning.

A language partner is someone who speaks the language you are learning and who, in turn, is learning yours. You meet up regularly – face to face or over the internet – and have a chat in both languages.

Because you are both learning, you are very patient with one other, as you each work your way through the normal stumbles and errors.

Better still, our language partners have become our friends, so it's helped us to build our social circle in France. There are lots of ways to find partners – through local language schools or via online sites. My wife once found a partner through our local butcher! You just have to ask around.

Our confidence has improved beyond measure and it's a good investment for the future: I feel like I use a different part of my brain for language learning than I do for most other things. There have been some challenges along the way, but also plenty of humour, like the time I offered guests some “marijuana cheese”, shocking and amusing everyone present [*fromage avec ash* – a local delicacy – does sound dangerously like *fromage avec hasch!*]. But that's a small price to pay for all the wonderful experiences we've had.”

keithvansickle.com



Caroline Buxton, aged 49, from Bath

“I go to an intermediate-level evening class at my local college. We do a great mix of skills in class: listening, speaking, reading and grammar. The teacher also covers idioms and colloquialisms so it's very much authentic French, which will be useful in situ.

Having English as your native language can be a real disincentive to learning languages, but you miss out on so much culturally and linguistically if you rely purely on it. I've also taught myself Japanese to a really high level, so I know the adult brain is capable of multilingualism!”

Language myths

Debunking the myths can help us all feel a little less anxious about learning

You have to be fluent to live in France

Non. Learning a language need not be about bilingualism or fluency. It's about getting by, challenging yourself, staying curious. "Consider this analogy," says Thomas Bak. "If you want to play tennis to win Wimbledon, you'll have to start at the age of five. But if you want to play tennis just to get some exercise, start as late in life as you like. The same applies to languages. If you want to sound like a native, start in childhood, but if you just want to learn for pleasure, to get by, or to exercise the brain, it's never too late."

I didn't even do French at school, so...

Non. It's completely possible to become language proficient from scratch. "Equipping yourself with 'I can, I want to, I need to' gives you the basics for a transactional conversation and you can build from there," says Cate Hamilton.

I'm just too old

Non. Just look at the famous Mary Hobson case to see how capable older brains are. While recuperating after an operation at 56, Mary read *War and Peace*, then taught herself Russian, did a doctorate in Russian poetry and still translates in her 90s. You don't have to whole-hog it like Mary, but hey, as role models go... **LF**

More online

[completefrance.com/
language-culture/language](https://completefrance.com/language-culture/language)

More ways to learn French plus quizzes to test your skills

**COMPLETE
FRANCE**



Michèle Bruwer, aged 62, is from South Africa and owns a home in Finistère

"A few years ago we bought a house in France and as soon as we embarked on the renovation, I understood the need to learn French to get the most out of our home.

I'd recommend local Alliance Française courses [worldwide centres promoting French language and culture] and I now have weekly Skype lessons. It's fun but a long process – I still rehearse conversations in my head before I pick up the phone."

Russell Clark, aged 38, moved to Vendée two years ago and works at Domaine Eric Sage winery in Brem-sur-Mer

"Our move to France two years ago all happened quicker than we expected so we had very little time to devote to learning French before the move. We did make some efforts with Duolingo and also the Michel Thomas language programme, which I still use now. Other than that, it was an in-at-the-deep-end approach. I joined a local surfing club to surround myself with French people, go to the cinema to watch films in French, and try to throw myself into situations where I just have to get on with it – like going to the garage to discuss issues with the car.

It's definitely not been easy – writing in French is still complete guesswork – but I've seen a marked improvement. "Parlez-vous anglais?" used to be the first thing out of my mouth but now I can make myself understood in most situations and that's a



huge confidence booster. French people now compliment me on my accent and language skills. One issue is that some French people want to practise their English on you, which I found annoying at first, but now I have come to realise that as long as you are communicating, even if it's in Franglais, it's a good thing."

ericsage.wixsite.com/website



Najati Masseoud, aged 72, is from Georgia in the USA

"When I was a child my parents sent me to a French missionary school in Tripoli. I moved to the US and felt like I was gradually losing my French but then, many decades later, I decided to see if I could regain this asset and part of my past.

I wanted to learn immersively so I decided on a homestay with Lingoo. [Lingoo.com is an online matching service putting language learners in touch with hosts.]

I've stayed with two families in France now. Thanks to them, I now speak much better French and understand more about culture and history. Beautiful houses, great food, wonderful people."