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Learning German has many benefits for young people – and it's not as hard as its reputation suggests

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As the government is exploring a new EU youth mobility scheme and working towards a renewed association with the [Erasmus+ programme](#), a [world of opportunity](#) may be opening up once again for young people in the UK. Studying or working abroad is not just an enriching experience – it's a powerful step towards building intercultural competence and a successful career in today's globalised world.

The German-speaking countries are among Europe's most influential cultural and political forces and have therefore been an attractive destination for young Brits. And learning German could be the gateway to a period of cultural immersion.

Learning a language has many professional, cultural and intellectual benefits. With almost 100 million first-language speakers across several countries, German is one of the most widely spoken languages in Europe. Germany is not just Europe's largest economy but also the [third largest economy in the world](#). Knowing German can give you a competitive edge with employers and even [boost your salary prospects](#).

More than that, learning a language gives you unique insights into different cultures, societies and perspectives, as [new research on learning German](#) that I have carried out with colleagues shows. It helps you look beneath the surface and connect with people on a deeper level.



No one's 20s and 30s look the same. You might be saving for a mortgage or just struggling to pay rent. You could be swiping dating apps, or trying to understand childcare. No matter your current challenges, our [Quarter Life series](#) has articles to share in the group chat, or just to remind you that you're not alone.

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Understanding German also enriches your cultural experiences, as you will be able to enjoy German-language literature, philosophy, music, film and TV – all in their original form. Of course it will also be useful if you are planning to travel, study or work in a German-speaking country.

While there are all these benefits, German is sometimes thought of as a difficult language to learn. However, there are many reasons why it's not actually as hard as some may think.

Shared roots with English

German and English both belong to the Germanic language family and have a shared history. This means that there are many “cognates” (words that are historically related and therefore similar). These are often easy to guess for English speakers, particularly once you are familiar with some of the patterns.



Can you read it? travelview/Shutterstock

You can probably work out what the German words “Apfel” and “Pfeffer” mean (apple and pepper). In cognates, German *pf* and *ff* often correspond to a *p* sound in English. Some knowledge of the history of languages can help learners spot (and explain) these patterns and identify cognates more easily. This is one of the many reasons why my colleagues and I have been arguing that all language learners should be introduced to some basics of linguistics, the scientific study of language.

It gets easier

German grammar sometimes has the reputation to be particularly complicated. It can't be denied that it can be challenging at times, and unfamiliar grammatical concepts in any language can take a while to get your head around.

The interesting thing about German grammar is that it is quite “frontloaded”. This means that learners will encounter many of those challenging new concepts – such as grammatical gender, cases and some specific word order rules – right at the beginning. You need to understand these basics to a certain extent to be able to produce even quite simple sentences.

It is worth persevering, though, as German grammar gets easier further down the line. German tenses, for example, are quite straightforward. Whereas in English we differentiate between “she read”, “she has read”, and “she was reading”. There is only one form to learn in German: “sie hat gelesen”.

Similarly, when it comes to pronunciation, there are some sounds in German that will be unfamiliar to English speakers to start with, such as the “umlaute” *ä*, *ö* and *ü*, and the ways in which *ch* and *r* are pronounced. It takes some practice to master these. However, the correspondence between spelling and pronunciation is much more predictable and consistent in German than it is in English.

Take, for example, the different ways to pronounce *-ough* in the words “through”, “thorough” and “tough”. Such examples can be really challenging for learners of English. You won’t find such tricky differences in German.

German has a word for it

German is famous for its long words. These often consist of two or more words joined together to create a new compound word. While compounds are fascinating in themselves, they also tend to be very descriptive, which can be helpful for language learners.

For example, if you know the words for “sick” (“krank”) and “house” (“Haus”), you basically know the word for “hospital” too (and you can definitely guess its meaning when you encounter it): “Krankenhaus”. And could you work out that “Spielzeug” (literally “play stuff”) means “toy”?

Learning a language is never without its difficulties, and German is no exception. However, my experience of teaching German at British universities has shown me that German is much more accessible to English speakers than some might think.

Many people enjoy the intellectual challenge of learning a new language and find it a highly rewarding experience, and it may be a gateway to some time spent in a German-speaking country. So give it a go, and don’t let the thought of learning German cause you any *angst*!