

“German is enormously satisfying to learn”

Rosie Goldsmith talks about how learning German has impacted on her life, and explains why she thinks German should be the UK's most popular second language



Biography

Rosie Goldsmith is a journalist specialising in arts and international affairs. For the BBC she has travelled the world, presenting flagship shows like *Front Row* and *Crossing Continents*. Today she combines broadcasting with chairing events and promoting the arts in Britain and abroad. Rosie is a proud champion of European languages and literature and speaks French, Italian and German.

Why did you decide to learn German?

I've always seen languages as my passport to travel, and camping holidays to Germany and hitchhiking across Europe ignited my desire to speak the language. It is a beautiful, logical and satisfying language to learn and to speak. I studied German, French and Latin at a comprehensive school in Cornwall. There were only four in our class so I got all the tuition I needed. I found languages in general relatively easy to speak – German in particular. I have a natural linguistic ability much like those who have a good ear for music; I have a good ear for languages. I enjoy rolling the language around my tongue more than I do translation or grammar.

I found the country fascinating so learnt in the best way possible – by being there. And it has been drawing me back for over 40 years. It started by visiting German pen friends – eating *pflaumenkuchen* and talking of simple things – and led to reporting on the huge political and cultural impact of the fall of the Berlin Wall as it happened.

What difference has learning German made to your life?

“Germans have always been better at speaking languages”

As a speaker of three foreign languages, a champion of European literature, a chair of international events and as a BBC foreign affairs journalist I owe my professional life to my languages. I studied German and French at university but there was no career guidance. Most of my classmates went off to be teachers, which wasn't for me. I moved to Cologne and began working for Deutschlandfunk, a public broadcasting news and current affairs station, and Deutsche Welle, the German equivalent of the BBC's World Service. My fluency in German led to me freelancing all over Germany for German broadcasters and also for the BBC World Service and *Woman's Hour*.

Our shared love of German was one of the principal reasons I met my husband. I became his producer on the BBC's *Eurofile* programme.

What are the cultural and social benefits of learning German?

Personally and professionally it has broadened my life. I can go to a Wagner opera and immerse myself in the language, or read and learn more about the country's history from people who have lived through that history. It has helped me get under the skin of this country, opening doors into a complex and fascinating place that would remain closed to those not fluent in German. I recently became involved with the Goethe-Institut, an organisation that presents German culture to the British public. They consult me on various issues because I can approach them from a German and English perspective – doing so enhances my appreciation of Germany's rich cultural heritage.

What are the economic benefits?

Having German as a second language can enable genuine exchange – of ideas, opinions and information.

German is particularly important in this respect, given how much of a major player Germany is in the European economy. Britain and Germany share a similar industrial heritage and have forged close export links, ranging from cars to clothing. But Germans have always been better at speaking foreign languages. The British tend to be lazy, but with our economy in recession, and industry failing, it is imperative that we improve communication with European neighbours to foster international links and improve opportunities for industry to grow. Speaking the same language is the only way to do so.

What do you see as barriers to students taking up German?

In this country we don't promote the benefits of language learning at school as much as we should. Children's minds are like sponges and can absorb the complexities of language that those coming to languages later on would struggle with. The emphasis on league tables has done little to promote the importance of language, and many children form the impression that they don't need to speak a second language, or that languages are too difficult. But all subjects are difficult, especially at first. We need to find different approaches to language learning, and do so in more interesting ways. Languages really are our passport to more rewarding and enriching experiences.

What do you think?

Do you agree with Rosie? Let us know your views on our Facebook page (alllanguages.org.uk) or on Twitter (@ALL4language).