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How hard is it to learn English?



How hard is it to learn English? Wild swings in meaning between seemingly similar verbs is what trips up learners Michael Skapinker Geishas and their apprentices attend an English class in Japan

When I taught English in the Greek port of Piraeus, a colleague and I used to spend idle time in the staff room speculating on what the hardest language in the world might look like. Perhaps there would be different verb endings for each day of the week. Or possibly the form of address might vary according to the height of the person you were talking to. The idea of a hardest language is, of course, nonsense. How difficult a language is depends on your starting point. As Guy Deutscher wrote in his stimulating book *Through the Language Glass*: “Swedish is a doddle – if you happen to be Norwegian, and so is Spanish if you are Italian.” Both Swedish and Spanish are harder for English speakers, although not nearly as hard as Arabic, which, in turn, is less difficult if your mother tongue is Hebrew, as Deutscher’s is. But Deutscher does show that some languages have features whose complexity outstrips anything my colleague and I dreamt up. Matsigenka, a language of the Peru-Brazil frontier, has verb forms that change depending on whether the speaker saw something with his own eyes, inferred it, relied on conjecture or heard it from someone else. Supyire, spoken in Mali, has five genders: humans, big things, small things, collectives and liquids. How complex is English? The thought arose after watching French president Emmanuel Macron fielding questions during his joint press conference with Donald Trump and after reading a Financial Times interview with Carl-Henric Svanberg, BP’s chairman. Mr Macron’s answers to the US press corps in English were hugely impressive. With no script, he skilfully evaded any diplomatic foul-ups. Mr Svanberg, who is Swedish, recalled, on the other hand, how a White House encounter went wrong. Speaking to journalists after a meeting with Barack Obama during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill disaster in 2010, Mr Svanberg had the press pack yelling in fury after he said of BP: “We

care about the small people.” Recommended Michael Skapinker Five languages Brexit Britons should learn “I was supposed to take a couple of questions but ended up taking six and it was the last one which got me,” Mr Svanberg said, reflecting on the perils of speaking in a second language. If it is challenging for a Swede to speak English, how much harder must it be for a speaker of an unrelated language such as Japanese or Turkish? At first glance, English looks an easy language to learn. Anything that is not obviously male or female is “it”. There is no need to worry about the gender of “phone” or “stapler” or “stupidity”. (Lloyd’s List, the shipping newspaper, stopped calling ships “she” in 2002.) Adjectives remain the same regardless of the gender of the associated noun: a brave woman, a brave man, a brave new world. Apart from the -s in the third person singular present tense (“she sings”), verbs do not change, no matter what their subject is (“he ran”, “they ran”). The word “friend” remains the same whether you say “he’s my friend”, “hello, my friend”, “I kicked my friend” or “it’s the house of my friend”. In Greek, as I discovered in my Piraeus days, these require an array of noun endings, which differ depending on the gender of the friend. If it is challenging for a Swede to speak English, how much harder must it be for a speaker of an unrelated language such as Japanese or Turkish? But there are aspects of English that are devilishly complex. The spelling fails to provide consistent guidance to pronunciation. Consider “cough”, “through”, “bough”, “though” and “hiccough”.

There are the irregular past tenses: arose, became, fell, swore, and many more. There are also phrasal verbs – verbs followed by prepositions, with wild swings in meaning. Learners have every right to feel put out when they put up someone for the night, only to discover that they can’t put up with them. They may want to put off learning English for another time. Some researchers have found that native speakers of Germanic languages, which also have phrasal verbs, find the English versions easier to master, but that Chinese learners of English do everything they can to avoid them. As English is the unchallenged language of business and politics, those who want to rise to the top jobs have no choice but to overcome these obstacles. If, as a non-native speaker, you manage to read the FT, you are among the most impressive of the lot – and will have your own views on what makes English easy or hard.