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Why English is such a difficult language to learn

David Cameron caused a stir after calling for more Muslim women in the UK to be taught English

Sean Sutherland | Wednesday 20 January 2016 |  4 comments



News Voices Culture



The prime minister, David Cameron, wants more Muslim women in the UK **to be taught English** to reduce segregation between different linguistic communities and even limit the lure of extremism.

Most of us who have tried it probably feel that learning a new language is difficult, even if that new language is similar to our own. So how difficult is it to learn English and especially if your first language is quite different?



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The difficulty of learning a new language will depend on how similar that language is to one you already know. Despite English speakers often rating certain languages as being particularly difficult – languages such as French, which indicate the gender of nouns with articles like *le* and *la*, and the Chinese writing system – there are similarities between these languages.

If you were to learn French you'd immediately recognise many words, because the English equivalents have **French Latin roots**,

such as ballet or amiable. If you were to learn Chinese you'd find that **its grammar is similar to English** in many ways – for example each Chinese sentence has a subject, a predicate and an object (though an English speaker would most likely find learning French easier than Chinese).

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The most difficulty arises when people learn English when they don't have the advantage of sharing many borrowed words or grammatical patterns with English. This will include speakers of Arabic, Urdu and Bengali – **three of the most common** languages spoken by Muslim immigrants in Britain.

Baffling spellings

In my experience, the most common complaint language learners make about English is that the spelling of words often has little or nothing to do with their pronunciation. It's easy enough to teach someone how to write the letter "a", for example, but then they must be taught that its pronunciation changes in words like *hat*, *hate* and *father*. In *oak* it isn't pronounced at all.

Compare this to the simplicity of Spanish, a language in which an "a" and other vowels rarely change pronunciation from word to word.



Spare a thought for those picking up an English textbook for the first time

Laugh is pronounced *larf* but the similar-sounding *half* is not written *haugh* – but of course there are regional differences in accent too. Like the "l" in *half*, there are silent letters sprinkled throughout English words: the "k" in *knife* and *knead*, the "s" in *island*, the "p" in *receipt*, and so on.

A **recent poem** of unknown origin, a favourite of English language teachers who want to amuse their students, contains

tongue twisters such as:

I take it you already know
of tough and bough and cough and dough?
Others may stumble, but not you
on hiccough, thorough, slough and through.

Another area of difficulty that learners of English often comment on is the prevalence of irregular past verbs in English. It's simple enough to remember that the past tense of *walk* is *walked*, *shout* is *shouted* and *pick* is *picked*.

But what about all the irregular verbs, like *hit*, *read* and *think*? For *hit*, the past tense looks and sounds the same as the present tense. For *read*, the past tense looks the same, but is pronounced differently. For *think*, the past tense *thought* involves substantial change to both the spelling and the pronunciation.

There's not always a pattern to many of these irregular verbs. For verbs ending with "ink" we have "think/thought", but another irregular pattern "drink/drank" and a regular pattern "wink/winked". English has **several hundred** such irregular verbs for learners to look forward to memorising, and many of them are very frequently used: *be*, *get*, *have*, *see*, *eat*, and so on.

Being polite

A delicate difficulty concerns how English speakers show politeness. Some languages have quite clear ways for their users to do this. In French you can **use the pronoun *vous*** instead of *tu* to be polite.



Not as easy as it looks. [banlon1964/flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com/photos/banlon1964/), CC BY-NC-ND

English only has *you*, so that doesn't work. In Japanese you can **substitute polite forms of words**, so that although *kuu*, *taberu* and *meshiagaru* all mean "eat" in Japanese, the longer words are more polite.

In English we can use longer words: "Would you like to consume nourishment?" instead of "Would you like to eat?" – but it doesn't sound polite, rather a bit awkward.

There are less obvious ways of marking politeness in English: use a question ("Could you pass the ... " instead of "Pass the ..."), express some doubt ("I don't suppose you could ... ") **and apologise**, even for small requests ("Sorry to bother you, but ...").

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If subtleties aren't mastered then otherwise-fluent learners of English (or any other language) – even if they don't intend to be

impolite – **may unintentionally appear rude.**

So spare a thought for those picking up an English textbook for the first time – mastering the quirks of the language is tough (pronounced *tuff*).

Sean Sutherland, Senior Lecturer in English Language and Linguistics, University of Westminster

*This article was originally published on **The Conversation**. Read the **original article**.*

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At a basic level the English language is relatively easy to learn,

because its grammar is much less complex than all other European languages and perhaps many others too. But it has a chaotic spelling system which makes learning to read and write fiendishly difficult:

<http://improvingenglishspelling.blogspot.co.uk/2015/09/difficulties-of-learning-to-read-and.html>

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Reg Prescott

106 days ago

I agree with this. English doesn't have case endings or gender for the most part (Thank you Vikings) and being an SVO (subject verb object) language, is generally considered easy to learn. The irregularities must be a pain though.

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Just a reader

98 days ago

Agreed, as an Italian native speaker I found English grammar quite basic and therefore straightforward to learn; irregularities are a pain in every language but thankfully in English there are not too many (the Italian language for example has a massive number of irregular -very irregular- verbs) and God knows how much easier it is to conjugate English verbs, with only the third-singular person requiring a different ending for its verb while all the others have the same.

However, if sentence construction is pretty simple the spelling system and the pronunciation are a pain indeed and some of their oddities are just impossible to understand for a foreign, they just have to be learnt and accepted. E.g. the different pronunciation of "read" (present simple) and "read" (past simple) and many others. Overall it's not too bad though. I do understand however how much harder would be to learn English if your native language was Arabic for example. I think requiring immigrants to learn the language is a fair requirement but a bit of understanding is needed as well. Learning a completely new and completely different language out of the blue especially when you're not so young anymore is not so easy.

[Reply](#) [Share](#)+1 likes  **AllanJC**

106 days ago

Theres probably little we can do to ease the pain of learning the likes of irregular verbs. They ar (sic) part of the naturally evolving language. As the French hav shown, trying to control a language is difficult.

However, there is hope for learners.

Spelling is a whole different kettle of fish. It is an artificial device, invented to help us communicate the language visually. As such, we hav some control over it and, should we wish, we can change it.

When u consider the problems it causes our literacy learners, the need to upgrade it to some sense of logic and predictability becomes obvious. We upgraded from hieroglyfs to alfabet, from Roman numerals to Hindu-Arabic, from imperial currency to decimal when the need was seen. Its taking us a little time to adjust to metrication, but we'r getting there.

We can succeed with modernizing our spelling so that it helps learners become literat in this IT age. At present it is an impediment.

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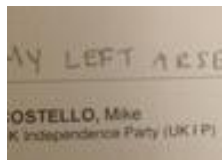
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