

## To speak or not to speak



**Language is more than communication. It is about gaining that secret key to open up a culture and gain entrance to a new world, writes Expatica columnist Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich.**

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*Georgia wrote:*

*Why do the Germans say they do not speak English, when they do? Is this an indirect way to force me to speak German?*

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Dear Georgia and all others trying to come to grasp with a foreign language,

Interestingly enough, I have noticed the same behaviour in many other cultures. For the most part it is driven by a combination of modesty and insecurity. Not wanting to struggle, not being able to express oneself correctly, results in this auto response: "No, I do not speak English."

But this really is nothing more than a mirrored reaction to our own similar feeling of unease in using the German language.

So next time you drop your problem (not being able to speak the local lingo) in the lap of the native, do not hold them accountable, accept it as your responsibility.

**You represent a great opportunity for many Germans to practise their English.**

There are other experiences, such as the frustrated expat who does speak German but never gets to practise it.

Yes, you are a guinea pig. After all, you represent a great opportunity for many Germans to practise their English.

I still remember an encounter with a British expat who was adamant about learning and using the local language. He stoically answered in German whenever he was addressed in English and he had a notice on his office door which read: German Spoken only between the hours of 09.00 and 17.00.

Learning German can be fun: think about all the long words you can score on the scrabble board, mark this one:  
GENERALSTAATSVERORDNETENVERSAMMLUNGEN!

**He stoically answered in German whenever he was addressed in English.**

Did this scare you off rather than encourage you? Well, there are more comfortable ways of learning a language:

- Watch TV and listen to the radio to get a feeling for the sounds and rhythms.

- Pick up the gossip magazines at the doctor's waiting room or at the hairdressers. This is great contextual learning.
- Buy a selection of children's books. Apart from the language, you get a feel for the norms and values that they transmit.
- Make what you learn relevant to your situation. What is the vocabulary you need: work related, private conversation, daily life?
- Write your shopping list in German next time.
- When asked for that great recipe, write it in German.
- Ask your teacher for a field trip to the local supermarket or gym.
- Avoid having high expectations and do not overload yourself with too many sessions per week? spread it out, take it slow in order not to lose the fun.
- See it as a sportive challenge and then "That awful German Language" ? a quote attributed to Mark Twain ? will no longer apply.

March 2004

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*Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich is managing partner of CONSULTus. Her website is [www.Consultus.net](http://www.Consultus.net). She reserves the right to decide which questions she considers relevant for her column. She will, however, not answer any questions dealing with tax or legal matters.*