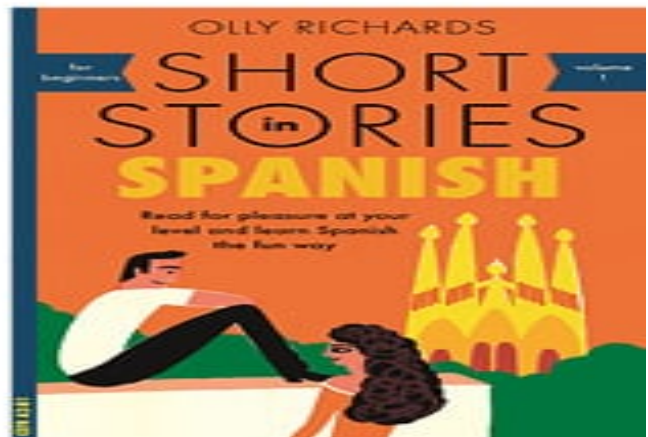
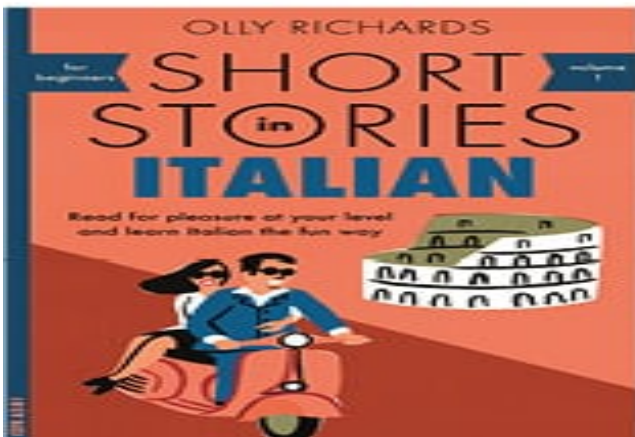
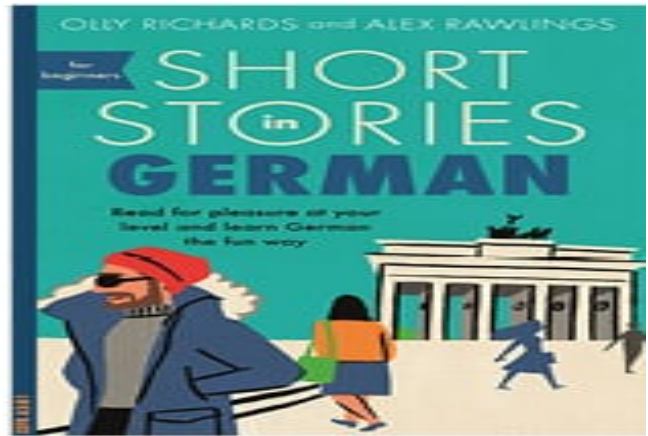
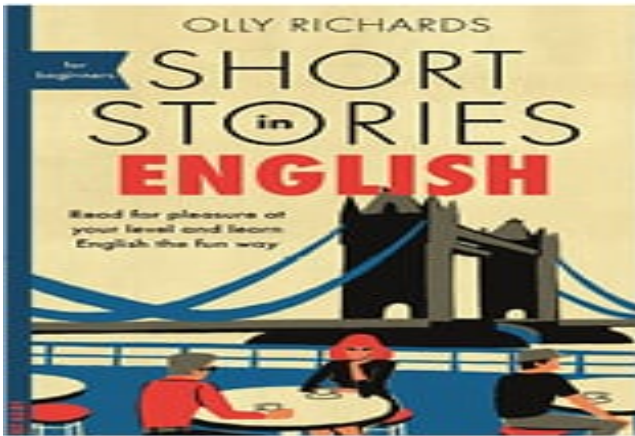
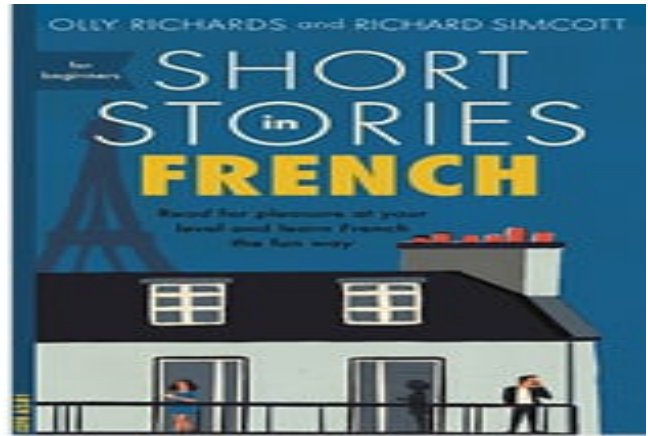
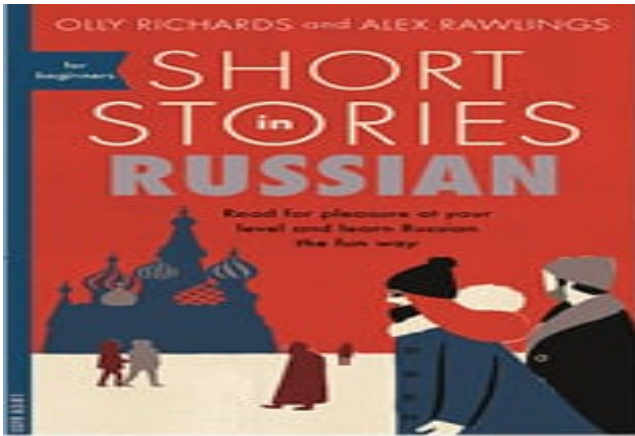




## Learning to Talk the Talk

Vacationers often pick up a French or Mandarin phrase book to prepare for a trip overseas, but did you know that the benefits of language study go far beyond being able to order a *croque monsieur* at a café or ask for directions to the Forbidden City? Language learning is a wonderful pursuit for brain health, with some scientific research suggesting that studying languages can help build up the brain's cognitive reserve—a complex neural network that accumulates over a lifetime and makes the brain more resilient in the face of Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, or other ravages of time.<sup>1</sup> And, according to *PBS NewsHour*, bilingualism is a better hobby than sudoku puzzles when it comes to keeping your cognitive skills in tip-top shape for a lifetime.

*VESTED* reached out to London-based language expert Olly Richards to hear his take on the benefits of bilingualism and how best to go about acquiring a new language.



Richards is founder of *I Will Teach You a Language* books, courses, and podcasts, and is a self-taught polyglot who speaks an astonishing eight languages—Arabic, Cantonese, English, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Japanese—many of which he learned while traveling or living abroad.



Richards has always been drawn to languages through his love for different cultures. At age 19, working in a London cafe, he practiced French and Italian in order to be able to chat with the many interesting people he met. Later, he spent time in Argentina, Brazil, France, and Japan, all the while forcing himself to find more efficient ways to quickly improve his conversational abilities without too much hard studying. He also learned Spanish, Portuguese, and Cantonese—the last being a language that he shares with his Hong Kong-born, UK-raised wife, Connie, and their bilingual four-year-old daughter, Elina.

He has observed that each new language he studies brings out a different side of his personality. “In Brazilian Portuguese, I’m very outgoing. In Japanese, I’m more timid and deferential. In Spanish, I’m direct, bordering on what would be considered rude in English.”

Richards’s teaching methods are a far cry from the rote memorization of vocabulary and grammar rules that you may have dreaded in high school. Instead, he relies heavily on stories, which he calls the most basic and human form of communication.

“When you’re learning through a story, you’re not just memorizing a list of words. From the ancient cave paintings to the Bible and the Koran to the stories our mothers read to us at bedtime when we were kids, stories immerse you in the language,” says Richards.

Students don’t always have the option to live in a foreign country, but spending time with stories is a fun and natural way to absorb new words and phrases, and it mimics the experience of language immersion.

## **Being Bilingual Has Benefits**

Many of Richards’s students pursue language study for both pleasure and brain agility. “A lot of people want to keep their brain sharp,” he says, and that “they may be worried that their memory is getting worse.”

Learning multiple languages can boost thinking, processing, and executive function. Research in the *Journal of Clinical and Experimental Neuropsychology* found that speaking more than one language on a regular basis improved verbal abilities and processing speed in older adults.

More benefits found by the National Center for Biotechnology Information tell us that bilingualism could delay the onset of dementia by between four and five-and-a-half years. On top of that, positive effects for cognition, including reading, attention, focus, and fluency, were discovered even among people who learned their second languages later in life, and stronger benefits were seen with those who acquired three languages, according to the American Neurological Association.

Richards’s own view is that studying a second language pushes you into unfamiliar territory, forcing you to use trial and error to reach the next level of understanding. “One of the more important tools is making mistakes,” says Richards. “Viewed through the lens of brain health and cognitive ability,

progress always lies just on the other side of your comfort zone.”

### **Confidence Is Key**

At university, Richards trained as a musician, studying jazz and improvisation. His musical sensibilities inform his view on achieving fluency in a second language. Musicians must do their daily drills to free themselves up for creative expression.

“As a musician, you practice your scales every day because you need to keep your chops up and your hands nimble. When it’s time to perform, you’re not thinking about it, you’re improvising from the heart,” says Richards.

With language study, “the equivalent is getting a daily dose of exposure to the language, so your brain stays tuned in to the language,” he says.

Communicating with a native speaker requires putting performance anxiety aside and presenting yourself more confidently than you may feel. “When you’re face to face, people look at your eyes, demeanor, and smile. They aren’t focused on your mistakes, but on whether you’re a friendly person that they want to talk to,” says Richards.

### **Read, Hear, and Speak the Target Language**

Richards says the goal is to consume as much spoken and written material as possible in your target language so you’ll absorb it naturally. “If you give your brain a chance, by spending time with your language every day, it will do much of the work for you without your being conscious of it.”

Some language students watch movies, but he doesn’t advise that. “They’re too long and are at native-speaker level. You want something bite-sized.”

The best study materials are stories that are just a bit beyond your current level of comprehension, so you’ll stretch without getting discouraged. Listening while reading is highly recommended. “My *Short Stories* books all come with audio books, so you can read along to the story and listen at the same time. When you hear the words that you see, it sticks in your mind and helps fill in your gaps in understanding,” says Richards.

Finally, leap into live conversation as soon as you can. Don’t wait out of shyness or nervousness. “The psychology is, they’re terrified of speaking with a native speaker because they think, ‘I’m going to make mistakes.’ But the day never comes when you’re completely confident,” he says.

So find a safe person—a teacher, language partner, or friend with whom you’ll feel it’s OK to make mistakes. “This is the only way to become fluent and to speak confidently in a language,” says Richards.

It may feel awkward at first as you fumble to find and create the Spanish or Italian version of yourself.



But Richards says that after you've had a hundred conversations in Spanish or Italian, you won't be nervous anymore. "So go ahead and start one hundred conversations with that safe person." Then, one day, when you do meet a native speaker, you'll feel more than ready to improvise from the heart.



### **Olly Richards:** An Expert in Language Education

Olly Richards started learning his first foreign language at the age of 19. Today, Richards speaks eight languages fluently. A few of the tongues this seasoned polyglot has learned include Portuguese, Japanese, Arabic, Cantonese, and German. He is known for teaching students the secrets to learning foreign languages quickly by using an innovative story-based method that puts the fun back into learning. His work includes producing more than 30 language books and courses across a variety of media with the goal of helping other people elevate their thinking about language learning for maximum results in a minimum amount of time.

<sup>1</sup> Godman, Heidi "Can I Bank Cognition Now for Old Age?" [health.usnews.com](https://www.health.usnews.com), 2018