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'Be persistent': How foreigners in Switzerland can be confident speaking German

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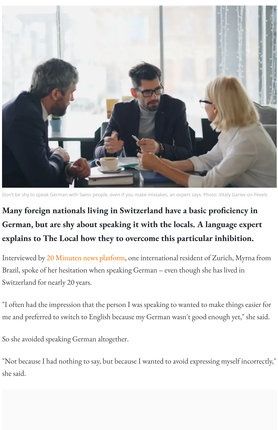

Don't be shy to speak German with native people, even if you make mistakes, an expert says. Photo: Vitaly Gariev on Pexels

Many foreign nationals living in Switzerland have a basic proficiency in German, but are shy about speaking it with the locals. A language expert explains to The Local how they to overcome this particular inhibition.

Interviewed by 20 Minuten news platform, one international resident of Zurich, Myrna from Brazil, spoke of her hesitation when speaking German – even though she has lived in Switzerland for nearly 20 years.

"I often had the impression that the person I was speaking to wanted to make things easier for me and preferred to switch to English because my German wasn't good enough yet," she said.

So she avoided speaking German altogether.

"Not because I had nothing to say, but because I wanted to avoid expressing myself incorrectly," she said.

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This sentiment was shared by another Brazilian, Antonio, who has lived in Switzerland since 2013.

"At first, I had a mental block. I didn't feel confident enough," he said. "Many people are more receptive to you when you speak English rather than broken German."

And Katherine, from the United States, has had a similar experience.

"My level of German is fair, and I can express myself in simple terms," she told The Local. "But I am self-conscious when speaking with the Swiss and am aware that I make lots of mistakes."

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How can foreign residents be encouraged and motivated to 'take the plunge' into speaking German?

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'Stop aiming for perfection'

The Local asked Eveline Rosa, founder of XLINGUA, a Zurich-based language learning school, how foreign residents should overcome their fear of speaking German.

Here's her advice

Stop aiming for perfection

"Many people stay silent because they try to build the 'perfect' sentence first. Communication matters more than flawless grammar," she says.

Train your speaking, not just understanding

Apps and traditional courses often create passive knowledge, she says, but spontaneous speaking is a separate skill that needs active repetition.

Practise under small amounts of pressure

Real progress happens when learners simulate actual situations: meetings, doctor visits, small talk, presentations, she says.

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Speak earlier and more often

Confidence usually follows action, not the other way around Rosa pointed out.

Be persistent with Swiss people

"Many switch to English very quickly to be helpful or efficient," she said. "Politely asking to continue in German can make a huge difference for progress and confidence over time."

Accept mistakes as part of integration

"Most Swiss people appreciate the effort to speak German far more than perfect accuracy," she says.

These tips, by the way, are just as applicable to Switzerland's other national languages – French and Italian.

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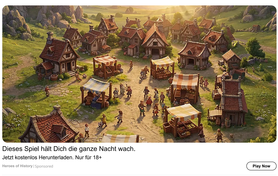

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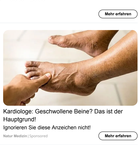

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