

We have seen that people learn foreign languages for a great variety of reasons. Though there are many ways in which the following statements need to be qualified, it is broadly true that all children, whatever their 'talent' for language learning, whatever their social background, whatever their level of educational achievement, learn to speak their native or first language by a very early age. Sir Richard Burton (not the actor, but the nineteenth-century explorer who translated the KamaSutra) appears to have spoken more than 40 languages, and according to Edwards (1994: 34) one Giuseppe Mezzofanti, the chief curator of the Vatican Library at the beginning of the nineteenth century, reportedly spoke 60 languages fluently and could translate more than 150 languages and dialects. Others are hopeless; they may be well-intentioned, but they are simply dreadful, quite unable to put a sentence together in a foreign tongue, and incapable of modifying their native language accent in any way. Indeed, the figures for successful school learning of a foreign language are in some countries (such as England) depressingly, even shamefully, low.