

B / BLB Level

PART 1 (Estimated CEFR-J Level: B1.1)

VIETNAM

Imagine sharing your birthday with the whole country! That's exactly what happens every year in Vietnam. The Vietnamese don't celebrate on the day they were born. Instead, everyone gets one year older on the same day – Tet, or Vietnamese New Year's Day. People don't give birthday presents, but children receive red envelopes with money inside. Children greet older people with the phrase, 'Long life of 100 years!' Tet is the biggest celebration of the year in Vietnam – and it can last for a week. Everyone takes to the streets to make as much noise as they can, and there are fireworks and lion dances.

LATIN AMERICA

Becoming an adult is a very special day for girls in Latin America, and it happens on their fifteenth birthday – the quinceañera. In some places, such as parts of Mexico, the father or another relative gives the girl a doll or teddy bear as her last toy before becoming a woman. In other countries, the birthday girl, or quinceañera, gives a candle to each of the fifteen most important people in her life. Then there is a meal and dancing. The quinceañera's first dance is always with her father. They practise for weeks before the big day.

JAPAN

In Japan, everyone has a day off to celebrate the world's biggest twentieth birthday party. The second Monday of January every year is Coming of Age Day, or Seijin no Hi – the day all twenty-year-old Japanese become adults.

Men wear suits and women dress in beautiful kimonos, which they often have to rent or borrow because they're so expensive. A ceremony is held in the local government office, and afterwards the new adults can party with their friends and family.

THE UK

Your 100th birthday is an important day in any country, but it's even more special in the UK – you get a card from the Royal Family! You don't need to apply – someone will get in touch around six weeks before the big day. Each card contains a personal greeting – when twins reach 100 years old together, each one gets a slightly different message. The oldest person to receive a royal birthday card lived to 115 years old.

PART 2 (Estimated CEFR-J Level: B1.1)

You know the old saying, 'Money can't buy you happiness'? Well, what if it could? Not by making it or spending it, but by giving it away.

Research tells us that if you give money away, you will feel much happier. In an experiment in Switzerland, researchers gave 50 volunteers 25 Swiss francs (about £20) each week for four weeks. Half of them spent

the money on themselves and made a note of how they spent the money. But researchers asked the other half to spend the money on another person.

Afterwards, all 50 volunteers did the same task in a laboratory. Researchers asked them to think of a person they would like to give money to. Then they had to choose how much money, from £3 to £20, they wanted to give. While the volunteers thought about this, researchers studied their brain activity using an MRI machine.

The results showed two things. First, the 25 volunteers who gave their money away during the four weeks were more generous and chose larger amounts of money in the laboratory task. Second, those same volunteers were much happier than the ones who previously spent the money on themselves.

How did researchers know they were happy? When they studied the results of the MRI scans, they could see that the parts of the brain linked to being generous are also linked to being happy - and those parts of the brain were more active in the 25 volunteers who gave their money away.

'OK,' I hear you say. 'That's great in theory, but does it work in the real world?' In the Swiss experiment, researchers told the volunteers they had to give money away. But what if you want to do this in your daily life? Can you really make yourself happy by giving? The answer is 'yes,' but it's important that you follow some simple rules.

First of all, don't start by giving away a lot of money. Give a pound to a homeless person or make a small donation to a charity. Maybe give just £5 from your wages, or try to change your habits so you save money to give away. To give an example, stop buying lunch at a café every day and take a packed lunch to work or school. You can then give your lunch money to charity. Namely, giving even little money or doing simple acts of kindness can increase happiness.

Learning to give money away is all about changing the way you behave. It's about living with less and being more generous. And research now tells us this will make you happy.

PART 3 (Estimated CEFR-J Level: B1.1)

High Earners

A Well, I reckon that doctors earn quite a lot.

B Yeah. I think so, too. They have a lot of responsibility and a lot of training. I'd say that doctors get about . . . £105,000? What do you think?

A Could be . . . or it could be even more, £120,000.

B One of those two, anyway. Shall we look at the high earners first?

A Uh huh. £750,000 . . .

B There's one higher . . .

A Oh, is there? Oh, yeah. A million. Mmm.

B I'd say . . . that has to be the footballer.

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A Yes, definitely. They do earn ridiculous amounts of money, don't they? So what about £750,000? Who earns three quarters of a million?

B Erm . . . I think that's the lawyer.

A As much as that? What about the senior director? Do lawyers earn more than them?

B Maybe, maybe not. I suppose the lawyer could be £105,000, and the senior director £750,000. Senior directors are in charge of huge companies.

A OK. Now . . . the pilot. Pilots earn quite a lot, don't they? They need a lot of experience, they have people's lives in their hands . . . I think they get . . . oh, at least a hundred, a hundred and fifty.

B Mmm. I know what you mean, but I don't think they get as much as that.

A Don't they? Oh!, anyway, there isn't 150 on this list, so . . .

B I reckon pilots get about £65,000 . . .

A OK. I'd say that's about right . . .

Low Earners

B Let's go on down to the bottom. What's the lowest salary?

A £11,000. I guess that's the nurse. They don't get paid much, nurses.

B I thought they earned more than that, actually. I know they don't get much, but even so . . .

A Then there's £12,500, and the next up is £22,500.

B Oh, look! Supermarket cashier. I don't suppose they get much. £12,500, I'd say.

A OK. That seems about right. What about farmers? How much do they get?

B I don't know. It depends what sort of farmer. They can earn a fortune, can't they?

A I suppose so, yes . . . But they're always complaining that supermarkets don't pay them enough for what they produce.

B I still reckon they get a decent salary. They own so much land! I bet they get 50 or 60 thousand.

A No, I think it's much lower. I'd say £22,500.

B Hmm. Not so sure. Then we've got . . . teachers. What do they earn?

A I reckon they get . . . er . . . £32,000?

B But it all depends how many years they've worked and how many qualifications they've got.

A Yes, I know, but we're talking about the average.

B Don't teachers and police officers earn about the same?

A Do they? I'm not so sure. I'd say that police officers get more. What have we got? £32,000 . . . £36,000.

B I think 32 for the police officer and 36 for the teacher.

A Um, well, actually I'd say the other way round. 36 for the police officer and 32 for the teacher. My mother's a teacher, and she doesn't earn anything like that!

B What does that leave? We haven't decided about the farmer or the nurse yet.

A I think the nurse gets less than the farmer. She gets the least.

B Why she? Nurses can be men, you know.

A True. Sorry. Nurses – men and women – earn less than farmers.

B Men and women.

A Absolutely.

PART 4 (Estimated CEFR-J Level: B2.1)

Qu and Liu have only one daughter, Chen, and they are happy to have a girl. However, like most parents in China, they put her needs before their own. Chen is studying hard for a place at the prestigious Beijing University, the best university in the city. Qu, a propaganda officer at the municipality office, and Liu, who works at the No. 3 computer factory, are saving all their money for her education.

They have lived in their house in central Beijing for 70 years. This part of the city is known for its close-knit families and warm hospitality. The elderly sit outside and chat, and people wander to shops in their pajamas. It is a way of life Qu enjoys very much, but he can see that this relaxed lifestyle is quite different from the rest of the country, where life moves much faster.

"We are not in a hurry to get rich," says Qu. "I don't want to rush around trying to make money - I am not a machine. I put my family first."

Tens of thousands of houses have been destroyed in recent years, and their home is said to be next for demolition. As these old communities disappear, the traditional family structure - in which children look after their elderly parents at home - is disappearing too.

For now, however, the Qu family keep the old ways. The grandfather, Qu Huanjun, who is old and frail, remains the center of the family. "My father lives here, so this is the heart of the family," says his son. "My brothers and their families come to visit most weekends. We are very close."

Qu and Liu are proud of their daughter. Chen is intelligent and well-balanced. She wants to study archaeology. "University will be very expensive," says her father. "So we try to live frugally and save for her education."