

# Canada's feat

The low value of the Canadian dollar and the efforts of schools to forge closer relations with agents have resulted in good growth for the Canadian English language market, despite the repercussions of the terrorist attacks in the USA affecting the industry in the last few months of the year. GILLIAN POOLE reports.

Despite lacking a cohesive national education export initiative, the Canadian English language teaching industry has experienced a number of years of healthy growth. In fact, the English Language Centre of the University of Victoria recorded growth in student numbers of 20 per cent in 2000, and its projected increase for year-end 2001 is five per cent only because it does not have the room to expand until its new premises are finished in 2003, says Christina Gambrell, Marketing Manager at the centre.

Although the Canadian market certainly increased this year, growth was dampened by the consequences of the terrorist attacks in the USA on September 11. A few weeks after the attacks, Greg Nisbet, President of the Canadian Association of Private Language Schools (Capls), reported, "Initial reaction is that [there has been] about a 10 to 15 per cent drop in bookings, particularly from the Japanese market, which seems to be the most sensitive to this."

Japanese make up one of the top nationalities in the market, although some schools have been successful in drawing students from other countries. "Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Mexico were our top countries but China is coming on strong as number three now," reports Gambrell. Other growth areas identified by Gambrell include Thailand, Brazil, Venezuela and Chile.

James Rice, Vice-President of Canada House in Toronto, says that their student numbers have "increased steadily by 20 per cent over the last three years". He continues, "One of the major reasons [for the growth] is the increase in the number of Koreans and the re-establishment of their economy."

However, Bruce Nickson, Director of Marketing at Modus Language Institute in Vancouver,



believes that visa regulations are restricting growth potential. "The biggest barrier to market growth is the restrictive visa issuing policies of Citizenship and Immigration Canada," he claims. "If there were fewer visa barriers for Chinese, Eastern Europeans and Russian students, there would be growth in the Canadian market of between 15 and 25 per cent."

However, following the events in the USA and the subsequent trend in many countries around the world of tightening visa security, there appears to be little hope of an easing of Canada's regulations in the near future.

As in most other English-speaking markets, there has been a strong trend in Canada towards serious language learning goals. "The average age [of our students] is still about 18 to 24 [years old] but there are more older, serious students," says Gambrell. "They mostly study English to gain admission into an English-speaking university or to move up the corporate ladder at home."

Lona Morishita, Director of Focus International in Calgary, adds, "I have noticed an increasing number of older students, but this is region-dependent. Asian and Mexican students are usually younger while European and Brazilian students tend to be older. Older students are usually here to

increase their career opportunities, they know what they want [and] have high expectations."

"Even in short-term programmes, students are looking for less of a holiday programme and more of an academic focus," adds Gambrell. As well as academic and business learners, schools report growth in the junior sector. "Our junior camp grew by over 200 per cent this year," says Rice.

Canadian language schools are also benefiting from the low value of their currency, as Rice points out. "The Canadian dollar is very weak so we are an attractive alternative to the USA."

Canada may well continue to win students at the expense of the USA, as its North American neighbour works to rebuild confidence in the international market. "Some agents have informed us that students who were thinking of going to the USA have now shifted their focus to Canada," confirms Rice.

However, Nisbet sounds a cautionary note. "The real concern is January and February with the Latin [American] markets," he says. "Because our Latin [American] students often have to fly through the USA, there is quite a lot of fear [among Capls members] that a normally strong time for Latin American students will be significantly affected."

## An agent's role

Unlike many of the other major English language destinations, Canada does not have support for marketing international education from its government. This has meant that language schools have largely had to rely on their own efforts to build the market.

Some of the key marketing initiatives identified by Canadian schools are developing a website and strategic web links; attending education fairs overseas; translating brochures into different languages; joining forces with other schools to launch a marketing campaign in a particular country; and paying a higher commission to agents to encourage the development of new markets.

For many schools, it is overseas agencies that remain fundamental to growth. James Rice at Canada House says that he uses agents in Mexico, Japan, Korea and Brazil. "Agents are extremely valuable to us," he confirms.

Focus International in Calgary finds that working with agents can be particularly beneficial for them as they are in one of the less known study destinations in Canada. "We have noticed that small personal agencies work better for us, because they recommend us as a school with a good programme, and don't just wait for someone who asks for Calgary," says Lona Morishita, the school's Director.

Christina Gambrell of the English Language Centre at the University of Victoria elaborates on how they are increasingly involving agents in their marketing strategy. "I am trying to look at the recruiting business from the agent's perspective more often," she says. "Instead of offering free scholarships at fairs, we offer these to a local agent who has assisted us in recruiting students. If we are unable to increase commission, we can offer an occasional free tuition to be sold by the agent."

Gambrell adds that the school also consults with its agents whenever it is producing new materials. "They – the experts – know our market so much better than we do. It is crucial that we listen [to them] and offer the courses they know will sell."