

Slow year for France

The reliance of French language schools on the US and Western European markets has meant that 2003 was a slow year for many operators, although there are hopes that business will rebound next year.

GILLIAN EVANS reports on business trends in the French marketplace.

2003 has been a tough year for many French language schools in France. The Iraqi war in the first quarter of the year had a marked effect on the country's language learning industry, owing to the French government's anti-war stance. This made France particularly unpopular in the USA, a market that some schools rely on heavily for their language travel students.

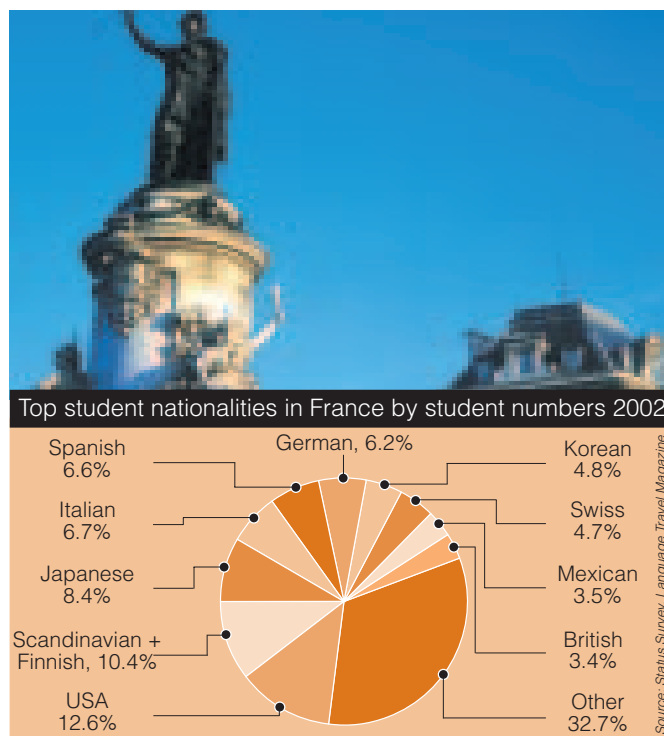
At IS Aix-en-Provence, the number of US students, which were among their top five nationalities, dropped, according to Anna Clara Sainte-Rose at the school, because Americans did not like 'the French attitude toward the US in Iraq'.

Sophie du Mesnil at Elfe in Paris reports that their overall business decreased by eight per cent in terms of value and student numbers. 'It was mainly due to the collapse of the US market,' she comments. 'The only Americans we had were the ones who were [against the] war.'

According to our Status Survey (see right), US students made up the single largest nationality of language students in France in 2002, although they accounted for under 13 per cent of the total. In general, France attracts a relatively wide variety of student nationalities, but Western Europeans continue to make up the largest group.

Adding to the problem of low demand from the USA in 2003, the European market was also depressed. Florence Rivet, of Sprachcaffe Languages Plus International, puts this down to a combination of the Iraqi war and Europe's economic slowdown. French is also losing favour to Spanish in many countries as the second most important foreign language to learn after English.

In addition, Regis Gendre, Director of Carel in Royan, men-



tions a switch from learning French to English in many Central and Eastern European countries, possibly because of their imminent entry to the European Union. 'I was in Central Europe this summer and everyone is madly learning English. Yet these countries were traditionally Francophile,' he says.

Despite the continued dominance of Western European nationalities in French language schools, France is successfully expanding its reach to long-haul markets. Among Eurocentres Paris' top nationalities, Emma Butler lists Mexican and Colombian students, while du Mesnil mentions Japan as an important source market for Elfe.

But one of the main growth markets for France could undoubtedly be China. 'There is strong demand from China for the same reasons as there is demand for English language,' explains Butler. 'Chinese students need to

improve their language level to enter French higher education.' Damien Renaux at Bordeaux Language Studies (BLS) in Bordeaux adds, 'French universities are free so it is extremely tempting for Chinese students.'

The problem for private language schools is visa acceptance for Chinese students. 'Chinese go to state universities. It is difficult for them to get visas for private schools,' sums up Rainier Dimter of Cefa Normandie in Lisieux. Butler adds, 'The challenge is to [forge] links with French universities, which is not always easy.'

Language schools are cautious in their outlook for 2004, given current trends. But while Sainte-Rose says they don't expect this year to match 2002 figures, which was their best ever year, they hope at least to match 2000 figures. Meanwhile, Dimter says he believes the US and Japanese markets are back on track. 'I think we are over the crisis,' he says.

French appeal

France has long attracted language travellers who want to learn the language and the culture of the country. Schools have reacted to this demand by combining French language studies with tasty offerings, such as French and cookery or wine tasting, and are still developing new and innovative courses to attract these students.

But there has also been a distinct trend towards academic and vocational courses, which has led schools to extend their range to include targeted courses for serious language learners too.

At BLS's new school in Biarritz, they have developed two new sports combinations, French with golf, and French with surfing, while their French for law and French for diplomacy courses are still popular at their Bordeaux school.

Sprachcaffe has also been adding to its vacation and vocational product range. 'Our clients can book computer courses, cooking and dancing courses. We also offer a 'holiday course' for people who want to have more free time, so they have classes for two hours per day,' says Florence Rivet at the school.

Rainier Dimter at Cefa Normandie says short, one-to-three week à la carte programmes are popular at his school.

It would seem that the more targeted the course, the better it is at securing bookings. Damien Renaux at BLS reports that British students make up their single largest nationality 'mainly due to our A-Level revision course'.

Dimter paints a picture of increasing short stays, sometimes repeated in the same year. Meanwhile, given increasing student numbers from long-haul destinations, the length of stay at some schools has increased. 'The average stay is longer [at Elfe] - around four-to-five weeks because of Japanese who stay for six to 12 months,' says Sophie du Mesnil.