



language

Enrolling on a language and activity programme encourages students to use their language in real and often familiar situations. Schools may attract tourists and travellers looking for a vacation “with a difference”. While there is a clear learning advantage of such courses, the “plus” element can make them relatively expensive, which can discourage some language students from choosing them. As JANE VERNON SMITH reports, the development of the sector rests to some extent with agents.





plus activities

Language plus activity programmes are a great opportunity for language schools to capitalise upon some of the specialities of their region or locality, in the hope of swinging the balance in their favour when it comes to students' choice of location. "It is a good way for agents to promote our destination over others," as Michelle Craig, International Marketing Manager at Cairns College of English in Australia, puts it. "[Students] interested in doing a certain activity seek out the location that offers it," she explains. "Scuba diving is a prime example of this, considering Cairns is right on the Barrier Reef."

Hence, the school's Reef Safari programme, which combines 15 hours of English tuition per week with the opportunity to undertake recreation dives and obtain a scuba diving licence. The school's Tropical Safari programme offers English combined with adventure activities, such as white water rafting, hot air ballooning and snorkelling off nearby Green Island.

"As a language school based in Vienna [in Austria], it [makes sense] to offer music courses in addition to German courses," agrees Cultura Wien's Renate Schmid. Similarly, Squaw Valley Academy,

situated on Lake Tahoe in the USA, has made the most of its location close to mountains by offering an English plus skiing and snowboarding programme to international students, and Ecuador's Academia de Español in Quito offers the "Anaconda Programme" in the Amazon rainforest.

In established outbound markets, as Craig notes, courses are frequently launched in response to client demand. "We have introduced most of our English-plus courses in response to demand... by individuals or agents abroad," says Jenny Bodenham, Agency Support Manager at Cicero Languages International in the UK. Indeed, because of the level of proactive demand by clients, the school also offers an option called "English plus your choice", which gives students the opportunity to combine any course they like with English language tuition. "We will always try to organise the course as long as we can do so professionally and it is legal!" says Bodenham.

In Portugal, Zilda Amaro at Oxford School confirms that language-plus provision can be client-led. "We have [organised] Portuguese plus history courses," she recalls. "One of the groups [attending] ▶





The point is that while a straightforward intensive language programme may appear to be a cheaper and more direct route to achieving the desired skills, additional activities can actually assist the learning process in a way that clients may not have appreciated. For many schools, “active language acquisition” is a concept that is intrinsically linked to language plus programmes. As Cristiana Panico of Italian school, Sorrentolingue, says, “Any activity is a good reason to learn a little bit more of the language. Any lesson is a good reason to talk about past activities.” Schmid in

Austria concurs, “We are sure that extra activities contribute to the effect of language learning and [encourage] understanding between people of different cultures.”

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A sample of what’s on offer

“The English with art workshops [programme] is particularly popular with [third-age students], as this includes local landscape painting or sketching as well as lectures and workshops from local artists. One popular trip is to an offshore island where students stay over the weekend to paint and receive tuition in [artists’] techniques. The island is just five minutes by boat from [the school], and they stay in a traditional Irish cottage for the weekend, then [travel] back on Sunday night for English lessons on Monday.”

Barbara Connelly, Atlantic School of English & Active Leisure, Ireland

was from Germany and the other from Italy.” However, in outbound markets, where language travel is less developed and money is limited, students economise by studying without doing extra activities, as Sergio Gallego, of Kiosk Estudios en el Exterior in Colombia, has found.

In such cases, agents have a greater role in stimulating interest, as Marianelly Núñez of Travel & Learn in Chile points out. “Clients cannot know about all these options unless we make them understand the advantages of doing a plus course and what exactly the ‘plus’ means,” she says.

However, it is true that activities do not come cheaply. Although some schools are able to run all their activities themselves, others find they need to team up with partners who specialise in the activities in question. As Gavin Eyre of Cape Communications Centre in South Africa points out, “It is very important to forge relationships with professionals, especially [in the case of] dangerous sports.”

“[Partnership] is the best way to give students high-class activities,” agrees Virginia Villamar of Ecuador’s Academia de Espanol Activa. “Our [responsibility] is teaching Spanish as a second language.”

So, given the cost of language-plus programmes, agents need to explain not only the availability, but

Charting demand

While language plus activity programmes attract students from a wide range of countries, the level of demand varies greatly from one outbound market to another. The countries of South America and Eastern Europe may be up-and-coming source markets, but they are not, as yet, fully mature in this sector.

Agents in the Ukraine paint a mixed picture of the situation. Evgeniya Nekhorosheva, Assistant Manager at FEOD agency, finds that language-plus programmes are among the most frequently requested by clients, with demand increasing year-on-year. Peter Stopykin, Director of Ukrainian Student Exchange Club (USEC), agrees that this sector of the market is growing. Indeed, he has seen demand rise by 50 per cent over the past couple of years. Despite this, however,

“demand for language plus activities is low”, he reports. “The main reason is that most students are seeking low-budget programmes or ones that give the opportunity to combine studying [with] working.”

In Chile, agents Marianelly Núñez of Travel & Learn and Juan Pablo Moro of STI both agree that demand is low, but rising. “It has grown definitely, but not [by very much],” says Núñez. The Colombian market is even less developed, as agents Christopher Barr of Bracademia and Sergio Gallego of Kiosk Estudios en el Exterior testify. “Students from Colombia always select the cheapest possible route to learning English, and they have to demonstrate that they are serious students... to succeed with their visa applications,” explains Barr. “Money is not in plentiful supply, and choosing a more

expensive course would cause them to demonstrate a higher degree of solvency... than [is necessary] for a more simple and inexpensive course.”

Yet, in the more developed – and more economically prosperous – markets, business appears to be booming. “Demand has grown in direct proportion to the number of programmes we offer and the number of years a programme has been available,” says Kath Bateman of Caledonia Language Courses, based in the UK.

Among language schools, some are continuing to experience the kind of big increases in business reported last year (see *Language Travel Magazine*, April 2001, pages 29-32). In Ecuador, Virginia Villamar says that demand at the Academia de Español in Quito has grown by around

60 per cent over the past couple of years, and in the UK, Jenny Bodenham at Cicero Languages International, reveals, “Demand for this type of programme is good and has increased over the past couple of years.” Others, however, have seen demand remain stationary.

Despite the perception of language plus activity programmes as less “serious” than other language programmes, it does not seem likely that this sector of the market will be particularly vulnerable in the uncertain climate following September 11, 2001. The international situation has certainly caused ripples across the industry, and activity programmes are no exception. However, the general opinion is that language-plus courses are no more vulnerable in this regard than any other.

Most are agreed, however, that interest in the UK and USA is likely to decrease in the aftermath of September 11. Gallego in Colombia notes, “We have already received [a] few cancellations, and there are a few students who have changed their mind and decided to go to other countries, such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand.” In Chile, Moro believes that Australia will gain bookings from the USA and UK, while Tusnebul Sukriket of World Splendour Holidays in Thailand says, “In the summer, the only [countries] clients choose will be Australia and New Zealand.”

Barr, on the other hand, predicts a shift towards provincial towns and cities. Either way, given that the USA has never been a major player in this segment of the market, hopefully the impact will not be too significant.

A sample of what's on offer

"For years, we have had a language-plus programme for Asian and European students from 14 to 18 years old. Skiing and snowboarding [areas with] 33 ski lifts, are only three kilometres from school, so students... come here for one or more years to perfect their English and to have daily winter sport."

**Donald Rees, President,
Squaw Valley Academy,
USA**

also the benefits of this type of course. According to Núñez, "It has been very difficult to make Chileans understand that [an English-plus programme] could help them [improve their English], since... they will learn and practise the language in a nice environment, doing something they already know in their native language – and it will give them another chance to [make friends] and expand [their] vocabulary."

It seems that this message is already well understood by clients at Canada's Kiosk School of English. "Parents and agents care about the curriculum and how students are being taught," declares Janet Stickney at the school. However, Schmid says that experience at Cultura Wien indicates that although clients expect more and more activities on top of their

basic language course, they are not always ready to pay for them. Bruce Osborne, Director of International & Business Projects at Wanganui Regional Polytechnic in New Zealand, agrees that price can be a barrier to selling language-plus programmes. "Price is often the determining factor, and we often miss out on business due to the competitive nature of the language plus activities market," he admits,

adding, however, that "we are not concerned about this as currently we have enough business".

"We are sure that extra activities contribute to the effect of language learning and encourage understanding between people of different cultures"

Escuela Hispalense in Spain is well aware of the thorny issue of price. Students are attracted to its coastal location at Tarifa for the windsurfing and kitesurfing opportunities it provides. With Spanish language programmes provided in the mornings, the school does not run its own activities, but actively



A sample of what's on offer

"Our course formula, German and music, has been quite successful since we first put it on our programme some years ago. Our partner is the renowned Vienna Conservatorium (VC), where students get their musical instruction on a one-to-one basis. The good thing is that VC is ready to accept students [of all abilities], from pure amateurs who just want to learn a few *lieder* to professional [musicians] who [have] already won prizes performing in international competitions."

Renate Schmid, Cultura Wien, Austria

"Youngsters tend to go for the English plus sporting activities, probably as their parents feel that a two-week English course with rugby in the afternoons is far more beneficial than a two-week rugby tour"

assists students in choosing the right windsurfing and kitesurfing schools for their afternoon activity. Irene Weiss at the school points out, "[Our lessons] cannot be too expensive, because windsurfing and kitesurfing are both expensive sports."

Besides price, another difficulty in marketing language-plus courses, is closely bound to these programmes being considered by some clients to be part learning experience, part vacation. According to Schmid, some view the language course itself as "an agreeable benefit" on top of what is basically a holiday. On the other hand, this outlook can also work in the industry's favour, as Eyre points out. "Youngsters tend to go for the [English plus] sporting activities," he says, "probably as their parents feel that a two-week English course with rugby in the afternoons is far more beneficial than a two-week rugby tour."

Most providers are agreed that summer is the boom time for language-plus programmes, as sports are the most popular activities and the majority of clients tend to be students whose main vacations often fall during this period.

However, for many institutions, dependent upon location and/or activities offered, there is also a winter peak. Again this is mainly attributable to the popularity of certain sports. For Núñez, the top choices among her clientele are surf, ski and horse-riding programmes.

Some other activities also lend themselves well to off-peak bookings. In Italy, where Sorrentolinguè's main Italian-plus programmes are opera, cooking and ceramics, Panico points out that, "during winter time it is obviously easy to sell these programmes – no beaches, no swimming". Barbara Connelly of Ireland's Atlantic School of English &

A sample of what's on offer

"At European Centre, we recognise that learning takes place outside the classroom as well as within it. We offer various opportunities for our students to meet and experience the people and culture of Malta together with other international students. One of our [most] popular courses incorporates just that – the combination of learning English and sports. The diving course is held at a PADI five-star centre, and students can opt for the open water diver course or, for the more experienced divers, the advanced open water course."

Andrew Mangion, Managing Director, European Centre, Malta

Active Leisure reports a similar experience, with greater demand during the winter months for the school's cultural programmes. Of course, many language-plus programmes run throughout the year, although it is much easier to attract clients year-round to particular locations. For example, in Malta, with its favourable Mediterranean climate, the English plus sports programmes at the European Centre are available all year round.

In terms of seasonality, there is a third factor that comes into the equation, as well as the type of activity being offered and the school's location, which is the clients

themselves. While students are generally limited to their major vacation periods, older clients are unrestricted by season. As a result, some language schools actively market to attract a more mature clientele. This can mean specifically designed programmes, such as the Club 50+ programme at Malta's European Centre, while Bodenham points out that English plus cookery, English plus flower arranging and English plus horse-riding courses are popular with all ages at Cicero Languages International.

Business executives can be a harder market to attract to specific activity programmes. As Schmid says, "Business executives are not usually interested in activities; they tend to fill their day with more German lessons, and they are also more independent [in doing] things which are interesting for them." However, programmes that offer various types of sport seem to be the most successful in attracting business people, as Michael O'Grady of Australia's Byron Bay English Language School reports. His school specialises in English plus surfing, a course that he says attracts all types. "Some [students] are business types who want to get out of the office and experience something different in their lives; a change from hours tied to a computer screen," he observes. Eyre in South Africa also notes interest from business executives in language and golfing programmes.

For language schools keen to get as even a spread of business as possible throughout the year, it is also wise to look at nationality mix, since the major vacation period in Europe is different from that in both Asia and South America. There do appear to be differences according to nationality, both in terms of the type of activity preferred and, indeed, whether they are attracted to language-plus programmes at all. "It seems Japanese like [these] programmes," relates Stickney in Canada. "They have travelled a lot and want something specific." In the UK, Bodenham observes that Japanese are the most prevalent nationality on most of the school's leisure courses, including flower arranging, aromatherapy and cookery, while sports-based programmes, such as horse riding, tennis

and golf, are popular with Swiss, French, German, Spanish and Italian students. In South Africa, meanwhile, Eyre finds that it is primarily South Americans who tend to opt for sports activities.

In the same way that demand for language-plus programmes is highest in the most developed language travel markets, demand also increases according to the maturity and financial prosperity of the particular market. UK agent, Kath Bateman, of Caledonia Language Courses, which specialises in language-plus programmes, identifies a significant niche catering for 35 to 50 year olds – “people who classify themselves as independent travellers, and who have as much interest in the activity as the language”, she says. In Colombia, Gallego of Kiosk Estudios en

el Exterior notes that more and more people are offering language-plus programmes specifically targeted at older clients, although this has not so far been reflected in demand among the clientele at his agency. Juan Pablo Moro, of STI in Chile, also sees little demand for language-plus from either executives or older clients, although when they do request this type of course, it is sports and excursions that are most popular, he says.

There may be a long way still to go in persuading all potential markets of the advantages of language-plus programmes.

However, perseverance should prove worthwhile. According to Bateman, it is good to be able to offer clients a range of programmes to cater for different interests, since “language plus activity courses often lead to good repeat business, either for similar programmes in another location or intensive language programmes in the same country”. A similar principle applies to language schools who, having successfully attracted a student on to, for example, a language plus sports programme, may be able to gain repeat business from the same student in years to come, through other programmes within the same range. Diversification can breed success. □

A sample of what's on offer

“The Yucatan Summer Spanish Institute is a four-week intensive advanced Spanish conversation programme with a strong cultural enrichment focus. It includes 18 to 25 hours per week of [tuition] in Spanish on Mayan history and Latin American literature, with special emphasis on Mexico and the Yucatan, as well as contact with contemporary authors and related professionals. [We would recommend this course] for Spanish teachers and other highly motivated advanced adult learners.”

Chloe Pacheco, Centro de Idiomas del Sureste, Mexico