

“Language plus” programmes, combining language learning with activities as diverse as surfing, painting and cultural learning, form a small but significant part of the language travel market. Despite largely appealing to a niche student market, they offer agents the chance to tap into a big leisure market for both experienced language travellers and the casual learner. AMY BAKER reports.

living the language



Activity-based language learning programmes fall into two camps: those that encompass a range of activities and are designed and marketed as full-time courses including activities in a learning context – such as a Spanish culture course – and specialised programmes that cater for a specific interest group and include targeted activities. This latter sector of the language and activities market can be further broken down into two areas: language learning plus sports and hobbies/interests. Examples of these courses include German plus skiing or English garden tours – they both enable a student to develop their interest in a particular area while studying a language overseas.

“Language plus” courses are aimed at special interest markets, and as such they usually appeal to a relatively limited audience. “Our regular adult clients don’t ask for [activity programmes] because most of them want to be free and decide for themselves their activities when they are there,” says Agent Yves Cloutier, from Séjours Linguistiques in Canada. “[Activity programmes] are more popular with teenagers during summer and school group travel, which represent 35 per cent of our business. Teenagers and some clients aged 50-plus [ask for these courses].”

Franco Rossi of AP Educational in Spain also reports that their provision of activity-led language programmes is currently quite low-key. “We usually do not deal with such a product,” he says. “The young students we send are satisfied with normal afternoon and evening activities [offered as a supplement to general language programmes]. We do not promote [language plus] courses unless students request them explicitly.”

Nevertheless, there is solid demand for these courses, with schools offering language plus courses reporting that student numbers have at least remained steady over recent years. Keith Pollard, Principal of Harrogate Tutorial College in the UK, which offers English and horse riding, and English and tennis programmes, says demand has been “fairly steady for some time”. At other schools

around the world, such as Linguaviva in Italy, which offers an Italian plus art, design and photography programme, and Coromandel Outdoor Language Centre in New Zealand, where students can choose between English plus a range of activities or English plus surfing, demand has been growing.

Maurice Kirby, Director of the New Zealand school, offers an explanation. “This is a niche market which attracts the language and leisure section of the general student market,” he says. “It is thus more popular in the more developed wealthier markets. As nations’ economies grow, and more people reach an affluent level, I think the market will grow.”

### Trends in demand

There is a general correlation between the wealth or maturity of a language learning market and its students’ study preferences. “Japanese are more interested in cultural-based activities, such as flower arranging, on our English plus course,” reports Hayley Stewart at Regent in the UK. Joëlle Sbrana, at the Centre International d’Antibes in France, which offers a French and sailing programme

*“Students not only want to learn a language, they want to live it. [Language plus] courses are a way of having a good time and making the most of an experience. They are a different and more complete way of learning a language.”*

**Felipe Espada, Instituto Hispanico de Murcia, Spain**

for juniors, agrees. “The Far East clientele like to combine a language course with an activity course related to the culture of the country, such as French and gastronomy,” she says.

In South Africa, Manya Bredell at the Cape Town School of English says that Europeans favour the school’s English and Savanna Trek programme, which has run for 10 years and incorporates English language tuition with a three-week overland trip around the country. “Their level of English is already very good and [European students] look for more than just English study,” she says. “Also, they are interested in the cultural aspects of a country.”

As Natalia Morgacheva, of Travel Company Svetlana-S in Russia, points out, interest in language plus courses is likely to rise in line with the general ability in a second language as students become more adventurous. With 10 to 15 per cent of clients currently asking for a language plus programme, Morgacheva says, “We expect this demand to increase due to the fact that students who enrolled for general English courses in the past [now] want something special.”

At Clubclass Language School in Malta, where the “fairly new packages” offered include English plus tennis, English plus diving and English plus cricket, Joe Aquilina reports that it is Scandinavian, German and Swiss students who are most likely to enrol. He explains, “English plus tennis is popular with Scandinavian students because of the mild winter weather [in Malta] and English plus diving is particularly popular with German and Swiss students because of their interest in diving.”

In Murcia in Spain, the Instituto Hispanico de Murcia also offers a new diving course, which, according to Felipe Espada, the school’s Managing Director, has been very successful to date. “Students explore the beautiful underwater scenery of the Mediterranean while learning Spanish,” he says. “The programme lasts one or two weeks. We offer [diving] instruction at all levels, from beginner to advanced,



## Language learning element

"In the conversation module of the English course, students discuss and talk about topics relating to the activity of their choice," says Joe Aquilina of Clubclass Language School in Malta, highlighting how the language learning element of language plus programmes is adapted to

teach students relevant language skills and vocabulary so that they can pursue their interest out of the classroom.

Lyn O'Sullivan, Marketing Coordinator at Planet English in New Zealand, which offers an English language and cultural exchange programme, echoes this.

"The language lessons cover the vocabulary necessary for the afternoon activity, so whether students are horse riding or visiting the Waitomo Caves, it is all an activity-based learning extension programme. The teachers accompany them on the activities to ensure this continuity."

For the literary course at Manchester Language School in the UK, a special course book has been developed for students keen to know more about English literature that includes extracts of key texts for students to study. Teaching and activities are fully integrated to enable

participants to gain a vivid picture of the culture and literature of several key periods of English literary history. Lessons are interspersed by visits, such as to Stratford-upon-Avon, the birthplace of Shakespeare, where students can watch a play being performed.

*"We believe that three hours a day in a classroom is enough for most people, and activities enable them to relax, meet a variety of people, converse constantly in English and have something to talk about with their host families."*

**Maurice Kirby, Coromandel Outdoor Language Centre, NZ**

and we can create a specific programme [for clients]." Night time dives, where students can see marine life that is inactive during the day, are also offered.

Other language plus courses offered at Instituto Hispanico de Murcia include a programme offering insight into the Semana Santa festival in Spain, which is not widely known about, says Espada. The programme has relevant cultural excursions and visits. "About 30 per cent of our students ask for activity-based courses, and little by little, this figure is increasing," Espada adds.

### Attaining qualifications

For some activity courses, students may not only be attracted by the language-plus-activity combination, but by the opportunity to gain a recognised certificate or qualification in their area of interest. They may enrol for the activity programme first, and the language tuition second. Hola Denia in Alicante, Spain, offers a range of water sports that can be combined with Spanish language tuition, and students can obtain their first star for scuba divers, as Pablo Camino explains.

"Many of our students recognise Denia as the door to the Mediterranean, as a place to practise water sports with qualified teachers and learn Spanish at the same time," he says. "We receive many enquiries to organise a multi-activity package with sailing, kayaking and scuba diving." In Australia, Burleigh Heads Language Centre on the Gold Coast has teamed up with a number of accredited associations to offer activities that can lead to certification. For example, students can gain the Bronze Medallion Surf Lifesaving award, their PADI scuba diving licence or a surfing coach qualification.

"The initial set up of such programmes requires a lot of time, effort and collaboration with third parties to ensure that these programmes meet the needs of our clients and run smoothly," says Patsy McLachlan, Managing Director. "Finding suitable accredited associations willing to accommodate our needs was a challenge. However, having done that, and with constant coordination and monitoring of these programmes, we have not had any problems."

### Global locations

Around the world, there are some schools in a better situation to offer language-plus courses, taking advantage of a nearby coastline or mountain range, for example, to combine language learning with opportunities for different activities in the area. This is certainly true of Deutsch Institut Tirol, located in the "pearl of the Alps", Kitzbuehel, Austria. The school offers German and skiing and German and snowboarding programmes, and Louise Ebenhöf at the school points out that taking part in these activities "effectively binds the [student] group together".

The Killarney School of English in Ireland similarly takes advantage of its location at the entrance to Killarney National Park to offer courses in English plus walking as part of its language-plus programmes. However, there are language teaching centres that offer interest-led courses that are not reliant on being located close to specific natural attractions. For example, at Regent in the UK, language-plus courses are offered in a teacher's home in a range of locations. Programmes are developed to suit a learner's interest and encompass trips to relevant places of interest. Stewart says, "We have our own dedicated department for [developing] cultural-based activities. The only difficult part is fulfilling extremely unusual requests, such as English and dog grooming."

Other schools offer a language-plus-cultural-appreciation activity package, which may include trips to places of interest as well as on-site activities that provide students with a flavour of the local culture. At Dialogo Language School in Salvador, Brazil, the Afro-Brazilian culture programme includes extra classes in the theory and history of Afro-Brazilian culture, excursions and visits to Candomblé ceremonies and museums, as well as special activities such as Capoeira (a Brazilian martial art), cooking, dance and music. "Dance, music and cooking classes [happen here] in our own facilities," explains Uta Röpcke, Marketing Director of Dialogo. "Only Capoeira is [run] by a third party professional, who joins his own group with our students."

Cultural tour-style activity programmes are a new area for one agency, Cepece in Vietnam, and Tran Van Chinh, Director of the agency, hopes that the courses will provide students with new opportunities to learn a language overseas. "We are planning to introduce discovery tours to Vietnamese students this year," he says. "We hope that they will help students to have the chance to learn about the language and culture of different countries, studying and relaxing at the same time at a relatively reasonable price."

### Price considerations

The higher-than-average cost factor of language plus courses may be hampering growth of this sector of the market, as Agent Norckzia

Ortiz de Navarro in Colombia testifies. Although she explains to her clients that activity based courses offer “a practical use of the language learned”, demand has so far been limited as, “ours is a price-oriented market”, she says. Nick Gibbons, of Castle’s agency in Switzerland, adds that some of his clients have enrolled on activity-led language courses, only to find on arrival at the school that the activities are cheaper if they sign up with activity providers once in the country.

Schools are keen to point out, however, the very different experience and advantages that themed language programmes can offer language learners, with coordinated language tuition and activities and the opportunity to practise the language with an international group of like-minded individuals. As a language learning method, Marta Jimeno Viñes at Escuela Quercus in Madrid, Spain, is adamant that targeted activities are crucial. “We offer high quality activities with a good language course,” she says. “Normally, the market offers the opposite, courses plus activities.” She continues, “The cultural weeks [offered] at Quercus leave behind more in the mind of students than a normal intensive course – they leave intercultural understanding.”

#### Other motivations

At Manchester Language School (MLS) in the UK, some of the activity courses offered also help further knowledge on a professional level, says Bill Godfrey at the school. Programmes at MLS include English garden tours, English plus literature and a course

examining the industrial revolution. For the English garden tours, an expert garden historian accompanies the group throughout the week, answering questions and talking to the group during the afternoon visits that follow morning language lessons. “In fact, we have mainly professionals on these courses,” says Godfrey, who adds, “Students spend the whole time speaking English to each other because they are enthused by what they have seen.”

Christine Hayes at Sherkin Island English Language Centre in Ireland also receives professionals on her language and activity courses who are looking to unwind and take an English language course that feels as much like a holiday as possible. “Many students have to use part of their holiday time to come to Ireland and learn English, so they particularly enjoy taking time for an activity, especially in this beautiful area of west Cork, which is renowned for its water sports,” she says. “They feel more as if they are on holiday.”

#### Recruitment channels

Hayes uses occasional features in specialist magazines to attract clients, as well as other recruitment methods. “[The courses] also



*“Students learn a lot more and faster, in a different, more relaxed style, outside of class. Learning like this is more effective, though unconscious, and it’s more fun because it involves different types of interaction, besides interaction with professional language teachers.”*

**Uta Röpcke, Dialogo, Brazil**

## Avoiding potential problems

There are some problems that can arise when offering language activity programmes, including unpredictable weather conditions and low course numbers, and schools have to be prepared to be resourceful in these eventualities. "Basically, we've been doing it for long

enough to iron out the main problems," says Maurice Kirby of Coromandel Outdoor Language Centre in New Zealand, whose school offers an English and activities course and English plus surfing.

"We always have wet weather alternatives prepared – problems arise

when the weather does a last minute change," says Kirby. "There is the risk of no surf, so we have courses in board maintenance, safety and reading weather maps for those days." He points out that unprofitable class sizes can be a worry, "as once the course is advertised, we accept even

one student". Kirby has avoided potential problems here by offering the course to existing students to make up numbers.

As schools often work with a third party to provide the activity, care is needed to make sure that the third party lives up to the expectation of both the

school and the student. Patsy McLachlan, at Burleigh Heads Language Centre in Australia, says that they constantly monitor the activities offered by the third parties they use. She adds, "Any school wishing to pursue this market requires specialised staff to accommodate this sector."

feature on the sites of each of our activity partners," she says. Godfrey at MLS points to word-of-mouth recommendation as a primary source of student recruitment, although he says he intends to promote his courses more intensively to agents from now on. MLS also has strategic contacts such as, for example, a horticulture college in Italy.

Aquilina in Malta relies on a variety of marketing methods to attract clients. "Our courses are promoted through language travel consultants, tennis schools and diving clubs," he says. Schools are keen to use agents as they offer an informed marketing approach

*"Being an international student is not just about study, it's about an entire experience. Our tourism, environment and Australian experience programmes are available for young and old. Combine quality education with a diverse range of action activities, spectacular tours and environmental projects and you have an unforgettable experience."*

**Claire Pugsley, Notre Dame International, Australia**

geared towards a particular market. As Jimeno Viñes in Spain confirms, "A good agent who believes in your programme is the best way to recruit."

There are clear marketing opportunities out there for agencies interested in promoting the language plus sector – the language and leisure market, students who already have good second language ability, those looking for in-depth tutoring in a particular subject, those wanting certification or qualifications in a particular sporting field and those who acknowledge the learning benefits of such an activity-led approach. As student markets mature, and with economic health prevailing, demand is likely to increase and so will the business opportunity for agencies working in this field.

Agent Natalia Sagaidak, of Benedict School in Russia, sums up. "Offering an active, educational travel programme allows students to combine language and leisure during their stay and gain additional language practice in a new environment. I think that step-by-step, demand will increase." □