

# Prestige products

With the global standard for multilingual ability in the workplace gradually increasing as bilingualism becomes more commonplace, there will continue to be demand for high-level language training programmes that are vocationally-oriented, as JANE VERNON SMITH discovers.

Clients are becoming more demanding [and] focused,” says Dave Stacey of the UK-based agency Skola. “We’re getting to the point where bilinguals are fairly easy to come by,” adds Catherine Ausman Torres of the Mexican agency, Via Lenguas, “so [to be competitive] now it must be bilinguals with special professional experience in another language.”

Specific purposes (or LSP) programmes are at the heart of the market’s response to this evolution, and French for army officers, English for diplomats and Spanish for insurance are just a few examples of the proliferation of targeted professional courses on offer.

## Tailoring courses

Because of their specialist nature, many LSP courses are tailor-made, either for one-to-one tuition or for closed groups. At Spanish school, Dialogue Idiomas, which specialises entirely in one-to-one programmes, Julian Melbourne reports that approximately 50 per cent of students want their programmes tailored to the areas in which they will use the language. These range from legal, medical, sales, real-time translations and aid work.

However, there is enough day-to-day demand in the sector for schools also to promote and run regular courses in certain more popular fields and, for many, business language programmes can be an entry-point into a broader LSP spectrum. In the UK, the Oxford English Centre has been running specific purposes programmes for around 15 years. As well as offering courses on request for closed

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groups, it also runs English for business and English for medicine, with weekly and monthly start dates respectively, and English for teachers is available twice yearly. “English for business is probably the best subscribed programme,” notes Principal, Graham Simpson, “although English for medicine has grown a lot over recent years.”

GLS Sprachenzentrum in Berlin, Germany, has been active in the LSP field for more than 10 years. Here, Business German, German for lawyers, German for journalists and German for teachers are all available as stand-

ard courses, starting any Monday throughout the year. In Spain, too, similar subjects are popular, with Melbourne reporting high demand from US clients for legal and medical Spanish. “Depending on the state,” he explains, “[US] health care and legal professionals in particular generate as much as 40 per cent of their business from Hispanic clients, and they need to be able to speak to them in their own language.”

Other than in these core fields, demand for LSP programmes is often highly dependent on

language schools to opportunities. For example, at the Colchester English Study Centre in the UK, Principal, Jonathan Seath, reports that English for doctors is being relaunched in response to demand from Italian agencies in both Milan and Genoa. Meanwhile, in Australia, the Australian College of English has recently announced a new English for nurses programme that has been designed in response to demand from Japanese agents.

LSP is not for beginners. At least an intermediate level of proficiency is needed to

## Linking up

Because special purposes programmes tend to be booked and paid for predominantly by large companies, language schools are able to build up strong direct relationships with these clients. One case in point is the German language school chain, the Goethe Institut, where, as Kay Hug explains, “We are working together with the business communities in the 16 cities [where our schools are located], and by this means we get most of our [LSP] customers.”

Direct marketing is also successfully employed for some of the LSP programmes at Alliance Française in Rouen, France. However, Director, Dominique Waag, reports that the school relies on agencies to recruit students for its French for nurses course. According to Julian Melbourne of Dialogue Idiomas in Spain, it is not always easy for schools to market directly to corporate clients. “We do try to market directly to corporations, but many do not have any policy regarding approved language suppliers,” he explains. “They let

the employment profile of an area or on changing trends in the job market. Dominique Waag of Alliance-Française in Rouen, France, recounts how, on hearing that overseas nurses were to be recruited to France, the school made a successful bid to create a specific purposes programme and attract foreign nurses onto it.

GLS Sprachenzentrum, meanwhile, moved into LSP when companies located in Berlin – such as Mercedes, Sony and Lufthansa – began sending their international staff to the school. Since then, says the school’s Dorothee Robrecht, its remit has expanded, and journalists from Finland attend the German for journalists course annually, while employees from a Czech bank regularly undertake Business German courses.

## Agent role

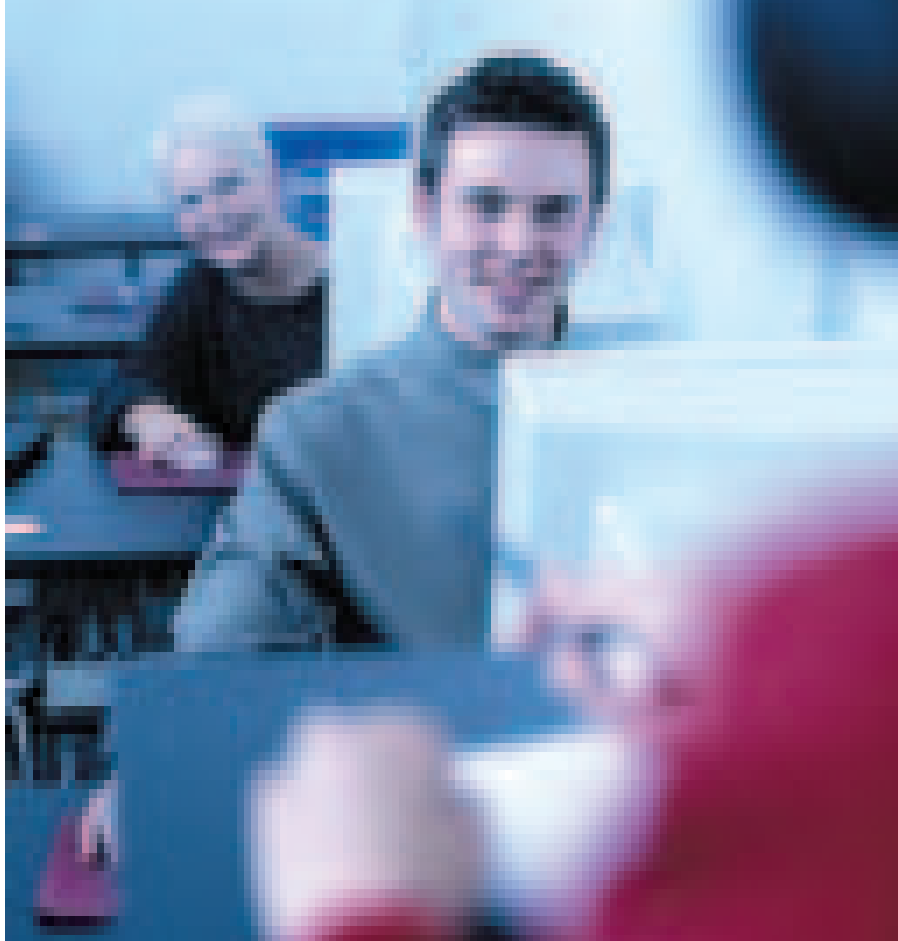
While schools occasionally set out to corner a market in a particular LSP field, it is more usual for new courses to be launched in response to a specific demand, and agents can play a significant role in alerting their partner

benefit from this type of programme. It is also normal for clients to be already established in their field of employment. In Seath’s experience, most students are “post-experience professionals”. Typically, the French for [army] officers programme at Alliance-Française in Rouen attracts a clientele aged between 25 and 50, while those enrolling on the Business English programme at Seattle Language Academy in the USA range between late 20s to early 40s, according to Seana Sperling at the school.

This means that LSP students tend to be discerning. As agent Torres puts it, “They are usually savvy students who are prepared to make a big investment and want the best.” So, what exactly are they looking for?

## Course considerations

For Robrecht, it is important that teachers should offer professional experience in the field they teach. However, Seath has a different viewpoint. “They are English teachers and not subject teachers,” he argues. More important, he believes, is the ability to design an appropriate course and to choose the right materials. Melbourne concurs: “We select



### Specialist sector

Even if price-sensitivity is less of a factor, LSP is, nevertheless, a challenging field and, despite growing interest, one that is likely to remain a small niche within the wider market. Indeed, many schools remain reluctant to enter the sector, put off by the unpredictability of demand, together with the fact that there are so many potential niche courses.

Certainly, for many, LSP is not big business. Two years after launching its first LSP programme, Waag reports that the LSP propor-

their employees do the searching and choosing themselves." This makes it difficult to recruit directly, and the school thus depends on its network of agents to supply half the students it receives, while the rest come directly from its website.

Just as LSP is a specialist field for schools, so it is for agents too. There are some specialist agencies where LSP is their core business. Brussels-based New Horizons is a company that focuses on career counselling, with particular reference to the European Union and other supranational institutions in the city.

According to counsellor, Gordon Allen, languages for specific purposes is a key aspect in the company's counselling service to clients. Admittedly, finding a good match between language school and client is not always easy, and "head hunting" – ie making enquiries and contacts to find the appropriate school – he claims, is often a requirement of the job.

Other agents have mixed feelings towards LSP courses. Their inclusion in the brochure can be good for the image of the agent, as it can for that of a language school, as Graham

Simpson of the Oxford English Centre in the UK points out. "Many agents like to have specialist options," he comments, "although they cannot produce [a large] volume [of] business."

Nevertheless, many find LSP a difficult area. The fact that it covers such a wide field means that the UK-based agency Skola reacts to specific demands rather than actively marketing these programmes, according to Dave Stacey. Meanwhile, for Madlena Todorova, director of the Educational Center at St Cyril and Methodius

Educational Foundation in Bulgaria, LSP takes a back seat, "as LSP is more expensive in [relation] to the general language courses".

The Mexican agency Via Lenguas is one that actively promotes LSP programmes, and has noted growing interest. "We have visited culinary arts schools, law schools and tourism and hospitality faculties," reports the agency's Catherine Ausman Torres. However, she too has encountered price resistance, which leads her to suggest, "It would be a good investment for schools with LSP to give special introductory prices."

teachers who are open-minded and who can improvise role plays of situations the participants might meet in real life." Crucial for him is that teachers should be used to developing lessons around materials supplied by the students. "Teachers who need to work from a textbook cannot work in this sort of environment," he stresses.

Aside from the teaching itself, there are other important considerations. Fernanda Rojas of the Argentinean school, Coined International, comments, "The most important success feature of our LSP programmes [is] that they cater for the personal needs of the students and that – in most cases – they include extra cultural activities that complement the topic studied throughout the course."

At the Canadian Business English Institute (CBEI) in Canada, Janice Kent stresses that because students tend to be paid for by their companies, it is important to maximise their use of time. Therefore, extra activities need to be highly relevant. At CBEI, examples include company visits, business networking events and luncheons at executive business clubs.

Furthermore, according to Melbourne, "The accommodation for LSP students has to

be top notch." This opinion is endorsed by Mary-Rose Blackley of New Zealand's Taupo Language & Outdoor Education Centre. Here, the school's Business English programme for groups targets the conference market, which is attracted by the range of sporting and leisure facilities on offer at the school. "The market is reliant on a quality accommodation product with excellent associated facilities," she says.

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Given the high standards expected by LSP clients, it is not surprising that price sensitivity is less of an issue here than it is for more general programmes. Melbourne confirms this view, but he warns, "participants are more demanding in their search for value for money". In France, Waag notes that price sensitivity is more in evidence when individuals are paying for themselves than when dealing with corporate clients. However, it is companies, by and large, that are footing the bill. According to Robrecht, "Individuals often like to see that these courses are offered, but tend to book general German as that is cheaper."

tion of total business at Alliance Française Rouen stands at around three per cent, with the most successful French for army officers course attracting between 50 and 75 participants a year. Meanwhile, Claire Stevens anticipates demand for the English for nurses course at the Australian College of English to be "relatively small – no more than two per cent of our business".

Many LSP providers estimate that the LSP proportion of their business is no more than 10 per cent, as in the case of the UK-based Oxford English Centre. At the Goethe Institut in Germany, Kay Hug reports that "presently it is less than five per cent of our total business, but continually growing".

It seems that, for some schools, the attraction of LSP is not so much the volume of business, but something less tangible. Simpson puts it this way. "I think it is very good for the staff to have ESP courses and it also gives the school a more interesting profile." Quite simply, those schools that work successfully in this sector gain for themselves an enviable point-of-difference in the language travel market. □