



learning

Many governments around the world are introducing language learning to their curricula at a younger age. This, coupled with the fact that

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parents are increasingly looking for a fulfilling, fun and educational vacation experience for their children, means that the market for junior language travel programmes is growing up. GILLIAN EVANS reports.

For many destinations, particularly those in Europe, language courses for juniors have made up an important part of their language teaching markets for some time, while other countries such as Australia and New Zealand have only recently been attracting young learners. In both the established and newer destinations, demand is high for courses that prepare students for high school in that country or the more vacation-oriented language courses that include a whole schedule of activities and excursions.

The UK, Ireland and Malta are traditional junior destinations, particularly for those seeking a vacation experience. Phil Mumford, Commercial and Operations Manager at Twin Training and Travel in the UK, reports that about 70 per cent of their clients are under the age of 16. "In recent years, this has been increasing due to the expansion of our company and the fact that in countries such as France, children are now learning English in junior schools," he says. "This has enhanced their desire to study in the UK."

Changes in the starting age that foreign languages are introduced at schools in students' home countries have clearly influenced the market. Mumford adds that a notable change in the age of students was evident last year as younger Asian children, from eight and nine years old, were particularly interested in summer schools. "This was possibly the result of the increased need for English in Asia and/or the fact that children are starting to learn English much earlier."

Louiseanne Mercicea at English Language Academy (ELA) in Malta agrees that this is the case. Last year, ELA experienced more demand for lower intermediate and intermediate English classes because "the

## 2003 performance

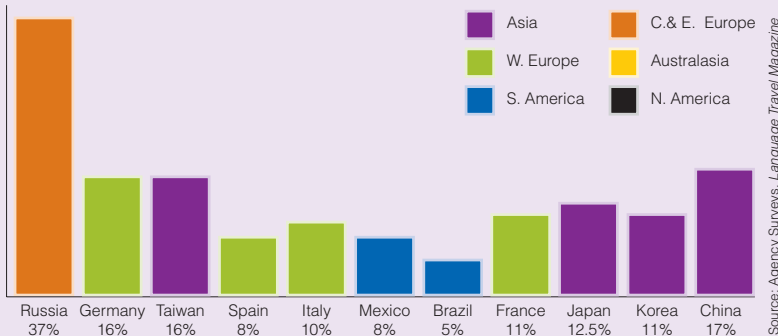
World events such as war or disease impact on the junior tourism market more severely than the adult market, because safety is a such a concern for parents. This is evidenced in the effect of the Iraq war

and Sars outbreak which impacted severely on the junior sector for many destinations last summer. Gary Maserow of St Marks Geos Perth in Australia says that many of their groups cancelled last year, although

he is optimistic of this year's market performance. "It does appear as though the Sars threat is over," he says.

In Malta, Keith Zammit of the European School of English in Malta, reports, "[Junior] numbers were slow to come in but eventually reached our desired targets. ▶

### Students aged under 16 as a percentage of each national outbound language travel market



majority of our groups came from countries where English is readily taught in mainstream education”, she says.

#### Junior programmes

For short-term vacation courses, keeping juniors interested in a language course requires plenty of extra-curricular activities. Ana Manzur, Head of International Education Programmes at Turismo Creativo agency in Mexico, says, “The junior segment wants to

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have more attractive and different activities. For [younger clients] a good programme is one that includes sports, sightseeing, visits to attractions, excursions and leadership activities.” She adds that juniors ideally need to have transport from the school to their accommodation. “They want serious English courses but also they want to have the best in fun when it is time to do so.”

Pamela Caicedo, Marketing Manager of Malaga Si in Spain, agrees. “Despite our focus on teaching and on providing an optimum learning experience, we do not forget that this is a course for teenagers and that they have to enjoy a holiday too.”

Taupo Languages & Outdoor Education Centre in New Zealand does not offer a specific vacation junior course. However, many younger learners enrol on the school’s English and adventure activities programme, which includes five adventure activities per week. “The activities have to be fun and exciting,” comments the school’s Director, Mary-Rose Blackley. “These are usually something [students] cannot do at

The slow start was mainly due to a lot of uncertainty within Europe as to what developments were taking place in Iraq and also through the Sars epidemic.” Canada tells a similar story. “Bookings for our junior programmes were down in 2003, especially

with junior groups from Asia and Latin America,” comments Michael Lisonbee of Eurocentres in Canada. “We expect it to be back to normal for 2004.” Economic crises in a student provider country often hit the junior sector first too. This is because adult

learners may have a definitive goal for their language learning such as university entrance or career advancement, while juniors can often wait. Celso Luiz Garcia, of CI-Central de Intercambio, Brazil, reports that junior bookings were low last year. “In 2003 we did not

home.” Even in the school’s high school preparation course, junior students can choose to take three afternoon lessons per week in subjects such as piano, swimming, golf or dance. “Because the New Zealand culture is sports-crazy we try to prepare the pre-secondary students for this,” explains Blackley. “If they are confident in one sport, they will adapt faster and mix better with the New Zealand children when they enter their chosen school.”

#### Group courses

Many schools offer courses for juniors as individuals; closed groups accompanied by an agent or teacher; or parent and child programmes – and demand for closed group tours appears to be growing. “We have a combination of individual juniors, school groups and groups with agents,” reports Michael Lisonbee, Vice President of Eurocentres in Canada, confirming, “We have had more [school] groups in recent years.”

The junior course portfolio at St Marks Geos Perth in Australia includes English for high school preparation, for students aged between 12 and 17 years old; a traditional study tour programme, which comprises English lessons in the morning with afternoon excursions; and a young learner’s holiday programme.

“There certainly has been an increase in demand for tour groups,” concurs Gary Maserow at the school. “I would say that the demand for longer formal programmes has been stable. Tour groups are designed to be fun whilst at the same time giving the students an opportunity of greater exposure to the English language.” However, Maserow adds that parents must have a realistic expectation of what their children will achieve on such a course. “It is unrealistic to believe that in a two- or three-week period, a student’s level of English will improve dramatically.”

There can be a serious learning emphasis to junior programmes. Dominic McCabe, of Students International in the UK, reports an increase in demand for the Ielts exam from juniors, while Mercicea in Malta says their groups are requesting oral tests at the start of the course, homework and to be put in mixed nationality classes. However, ensuring students enjoy themselves and have a packed timetable of extra-curricular activi-

#### Safety factors

When it comes to juniors, safety is a big issue. Ana Manzur of Turismo Creativo in Mexico says the main destination for their junior clients is Canada, owing to its safety and proximity. “Parents in Mexico want to have their kids near to

have many bookings for juniors but we had a few family courses. One of the reasons is that parents wait to invest money when they’re a bit older as it’s expensive to go abroad in Brazil.” A similar picture is painted by Cecilia Galli, Director of Link Viagens Culturais in

Brazil, where around 25 per cent of their clients are aged under 16 years old. “In the last two years, [junior] numbers have decreased,” she says. “Families tend to postpone the programmes for younger children for better economic times.”

ties remains vital to the success of a junior programme year on year.

Taupo Language & Outdoor Education Centre has adapted its English and adventure course to meet both student and parent expectations. "We encourage students to enrol on, for example, two weeks full-time English and two weeks full-time English and adventure activities," says Blackley. "The students can then take the 10 activities at any time over the four weeks. The parents are happy because the kids are studying more English [and] the kids are pleased because they can choose just the best activities and stay longer."

### Younger learners

Owing to the trend towards younger language travellers and the general tourism trend of adults wanting to get as much out of their vacation as possible, parent and children language courses have become a significant feature of the language travel market in recent

years. At ELA, Mercicea reports, "The [average] age [of juniors] has gone down. More and more families with juniors, aged between four and 10, are joining the school."

In Costa Rica, David Hansen at Iped also says that they have experienced growing demand from families with young children. "We had more juniors this year than in any other year," he states. "We get all ages from four years old upwards."

Talk International School of Languages in the USA also offers a special course for children of adult learners enrolled at the school, called TalkKids, available for children aged from eight upwards. "TalkKids is very popular as the parents are studying in our adult programme, as the children study in TalkKids," says Rina Buberoglu, Marketing Director at the school.

Agents report another trend among very young learners: learning the language at camps in their home countries. Info ProLingua in France sends its youngest

them if they are under 16," she comments.

Regulations regarding the hosting of junior students have been very patchy in the past, but as governments and various industry associations have acknowledged the potential of this sector, they have been tightening up

guidelines and codes of practice for junior language course providers. New Zealand's Ministry of Education has developed a Code of Practice for the Pastoral Care of Young Learners, which must be signed by all NZQA-registered schools. This outlines the measures

schools should have in place to ensure the safety of their juniors. In the UK, the British Council is tightening up its provision for young learners this year (see *Language Travel Magazine*, October 2003, page 28).

While such measures are undoubtedly valuable, it is up to individual schools to

put into practice their own safety measures. Phil Mumford of Twin Training and Travel in the UK explains their procedures. "To ensure the safety of all of our students we employ welfare officers along with qualified and police-checked staff in all of our summer school centres," he

says. "During host family programmes, group leaders are contacted every day. Questionnaires are given to all party members at the end of every course and followed up where appropriate."

For Taupo Language & Outdoor Education Centre in New Zealand, where activities include bungee

students overseas at the age of nine, but it also offers a different type of course for students from the age of seven. "It is a language camp in France – [it is] reassuring for [young students] to be in their own country at their age – completely run in English with English-speaking natives as teachers and group leaders," explains Carine Catogni at the agency.

Similarly, Claudia Herrmann at GLS Sprachenzentrum in Germany, which is a school and agency, says that four per cent of their clients studying overseas are aged between eight and 12, and a further 51 per cent are aged from 12 to 16 years old. "There is a trend towards starting languages in schools earlier," Herrmann explains. "We have a much higher demand from younger children but most of them don't want to travel abroad. The very young ones are catered for in our own junior centre in Berlin where we offer an international camp for foreign children learning German and German children learning English."

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Given the potential rewards of the junior market, it is one few agents can ignore. Yet agents should take note, as schools point to the importance of using in-country agents or having a local contact when dealing with the junior sector. "Most parents want to have a local contact and require a great deal of information, which can be difficult to do from abroad," says Lisonbee in Canada.

Young learners are, of course, the language travellers of the future, and schools report a good rate of repeat bookings from junior clients. "We have students that repeat the course; their first time they came with an agency and with a group of friends, and the next year they have come with another friend and enrolled by themselves," says Caicedo in Spain. □

jumping and sky diving, the school has an additional duty to ensure the operators they use adhere to safety requirements. Mary-Rose Blackley at the school says that safety is "paramount".

"We will not use an activity operator that does not have their current Occupational Safety and Health – or

equivalent – qualification," she says. "Before our two busy seasons, we check to make sure that the activity operator has not changed its ownership status, its drivers are qualified, etc."

In Malta, Keith Zammit, Director of the European School of English, says, "We engage the services of

welfare officers throughout the year, whose responsibility lies mainly in ensuring that students are always within a safe environment. These same officers pay visits to the host families as well as residential accommodation to ensure that standards are always being met. On activities,

there is always a welfare officer on duty."

Some schools also believe that host families can provide added security for juniors. "A family context provides a good deal of security and support for children," asserts Dominic McCabe of Students International in the UK.

Although host family accommodation is most popular among ELA students in Malta, Louiseanne Mercieca at ELA adds, "With large groups [of 10 or more students] a hotel is usually preferred because it can be easily controlled by the group leader."