

Spanish competition

Aggressive marketing campaigns are being conducted by some language schools in Spain to create a broader student nationality mix, while attention is also being focused on a diverse product range. GILLIAN EVANS reports.

Course developments

The Spanish language is favoured by students with both serious and recreational motives, meaning that schools have to offer a good range of programmes to tap into the wide ranging demand. Bob Burger from Malaca Instituto in Malaga observes, "Agents seem to like schools that are able to offer more than 'intensive' courses."

Jose Mendez from Centro de Idiomas Quorum in Nerja reports increased interest in Dele exam preparation. "The Dele has become more and more important for those trying to find jobs in Spain and in Spanish-speaking countries," he explains.

To tap into demand for short intensive courses specifically targeted at professionals, Babylon Idiomas has launched Español Expres. "This," says David Anthonisz at the school, "is geared towards business people who wish to get to grips with Spanish in the shortest time possible."

Estudio Sampere, meanwhile, has launched a work experience programme at its Alicante and El Puerto branches, while it has targeted another niche of the leisure market by developing a course for students aged 50-plus.

Offering Spanish with dance, particularly Flamenco, is also a winning mix. "We have decided that we will start offering dance classes – Salsa, Merengue and other styles – in the same format as our Flamenco and Spanish programme," relates Mendez.

Fierce competition has characterised Spain's language teaching market during the last year, with some schools waging commission wars in a bid to attract agents and boost their student numbers in what has been a rather slow moving market for some. One such school is Centro de Idiomas Quorum in Nerja. "We are aggressively marketing to agencies, offering them excellent commissions and great services," states Jose Mendez at the school. "We hope that we can diversify the agencies we work with so we can reach many more countries."

For a school that had previously relied upon direct bookings, Quorum's agency-centred marketing strategy has paid off. "We were finally able to break through with agencies [in 2005]," reports Mendez. "We had agencies before 2005, but by the end of the year many agencies started sending us clients on a more consistent basis." He reports a 125 per cent hike in agency bookings in 2006 compared with the previous year, which propelled a 10 per cent increase in student numbers and 15 per cent growth in students weeks in 2005, with similar growth rates for 2006.

Another success story was for three-year-old Babylon Idiomas, which has centres in three Spanish cities as well as in Buenos Aires and Costa Rica. In fact, spokesperson for the school, David Anthonisz, claims that, "Babylon Idiomas has been the fastest growing language school in Spain, currently running three schools under its own management and expanding into new markets every year." Like Quorum, Babylon Idiomas is now turning its marketing attention to agents.

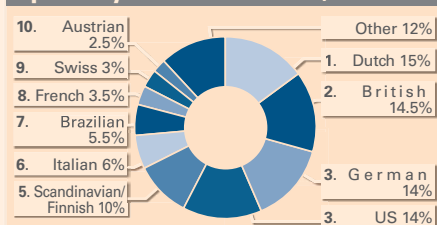
Other players report mixed results. Malaca Instituto in Malaga experienced static student numbers in 2005 and a slight increase in 2006, whereas its newer sister school, La Brisa, "increased significantly" in both years, according to Marketing Director, Bob Burger. Estudio Sampere, which has several centres in Spain and one in Ecuador, recorded a four per cent decrease in student numbers in 2005, but a healthy 15 per cent hike in 2006. This was achieved, in part, to a 14 per cent rise in students from Korea – a considerable success in a market dominated by European students. But Juan Manuel Sampere, Managing Director of the school, admits, "Our main markets are the USA and Europe. [We have] very few from Asia and none from Africa."

Diversifying the student nationality mix is something that concerns most schools. Just over 50 per cent of language travellers to Spain are from Western Europe, according to our annual Spain Status statistics (see *Language Travel Magazine*, September 2006, page 51), and the main source countries for Spanish schools are Germany, the UK, the Netherlands, the USA and Sweden.

One of the main obstacles to schools barring them from spreading their marketing reach is the restrictive Spanish visa regulations from some countries, meaning that most schools concentrate their marketing efforts on non-visa countries, as Anthonisz explains. "We've had no problems processing and obtaining visas for students who genuinely seek to learn Spanish," he asserts, but he adds, "We do not process applications from countries such as Senegal, Nigeria or Pakistan since we learned that the



Top student nationalities in Spain by student weeks, 2005



Source: LTM Status Survey, figures rounded to nearest half

chances of obtaining a visa are pretty close to zero." Burger adds, "Visas are practically impossible from most Far East countries – except Japan and Korea – and also India, Pakistan, etc."

In terms of expansion, the hot spots for Spanish language schools are closer to home. Sweden represents a good opportunity as, according to Mendez, Spanish is mandatory in Swedish schools. In addition, he says, Quorum is targeting new European Union members in Eastern Europe through a strategy of special offers and prices. "As many Eastern Europeans gain the right to work in Spain in the next year, then their interest to learn the language will increase dramatically," he asserts.

The year ahead looks like a busy one for most language schools in Spain, with student numbers forecast to rise by at least eight per cent. However, aggressive marketing campaigns will continue to dominate the scene and the role of the agent looks set to become even more important in the future. ●

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