

specialist

Globalisation has meant that companies throughout the world require employees with a good knowledge of a foreign language, often with very specific skills in their business area, to enable them to deal with customers and companies around the world. This, coupled with the trend towards the relocation of employees to other countries, has propelled demand for business language and specific purposes programmes. GILLIAN EVANS reports on this highly specialised niche.

products

Various factors are driving the world's appetite for business language programmes, not least globalisation. "Excellent global communication skills are becoming a necessity [rather] than a desire as former trade barriers disintegrate and new trade partnerships and government initiatives are pursued," underlines Fiona Wilkinson, Marketing and Communications Manager at Bell International in the UK.

The business language programmes sector covers a broad spectrum of courses, from general business courses for students who want to improve their employability to highly targeted language for specific purposes (LSP) programmes. Specific language programmes are tailored to a particular professional field, such as aviation, science or law, or the exact needs of a company. Whether general or highly targeted, courses must constantly be revised to keep up with changes in the business environment.

Some of the more general programmes include a diverse range of skills that are useful in business, from employee management to the business culture in a country. For example, at Embassy CES in the USA, the executive programme includes optional extras such as a career skills module, which includes interviewing for jobs, understanding office politics, consensus building, decision making and examining the cultural differences in doing international business.

Students can also elect to take the Test of English for International Communications (Toeic), which is, according to Geoff White, Director of Sales and Admissions at Embassy CES in the USA and Canada, "an international, respected indicator of business English language proficiency".

English dominates

In terms of demand, English, being the main language of international business, dominates this language teaching sector. Guido Schillig, Managing Director of Anglo-Continental in the UK, says, "More and more companies are becoming global enterprises. Therefore the necessity to work in a common language, English, is key to communications with such organisations and essential when dealing with their customers."

While the demand for English is likely to continue to drive this sector of the market, business courses in other languages are also growing in popularity. Crayton Walker, Director of Studies at Industrie-Sprachen-Dienst (ISD) in Germany – where the portfolio of business courses includes financial German, technical German for the auto industry and business German for management consultants – confirms that this sector is a growth area for ISD. "The increasing demand is caused by globalisation strategies which the really large German companies have," he says. "Personnel from subsidiaries or partner companies often need to be trained in German in order to really communicate with the German parent company. English could be used as a *lingua franca* but if the employee is going to be living and working in Germany for any length of time, or has come to the parent company for training, he/she will often need German."

Demand for business Spanish is also on the up as Latin America becomes increasingly important in international trade. Esade Escuela de Idiomas in Spain, which is part of the Esade Business School, includes business Spanish, Spanish for tourism and Spanish for law among its offerings, and the school's Assistant Director of Spanish



Specialist problems

According to Mark van Niekerk, Director of One World Language School in South Africa, in comparison to their general English students, the average student on their English for specific purposes course is "more dedicated, usually has a better grasp of English and stays for longer periods of time". They are also usually sponsored by their companies.

This means that schools are not only satisfying the demands of the client but also the expectations of the company that is footing the bill. "A company may well be sponsoring [the client] and monitoring very closely his or her progress," confirms Guido Schillig of Anglo-Continental in the UK. "The company/organisation is paying and therefore demands results."

Fiona Wilkinson of Bell International in the UK agrees. "Because this sector is usually corporate or government sponsored, the requirement is for highly bespoke programmes that meet prescribed needs [and are] flexible and highly intensive. The focus [of the course] is on rapid learning and achieving as much as possible in a shorter period of time."

Clients have high expectations not only of course content but also of the school's facilities. Some schools offer high-grade host family accommodation, while others offer a whole raft of executive extras. The Language Academy in the USA, for example, has a separate executive centre where participants have access to high-speed ADSL Internet lines, a fax service, complimentary limousine pick-up service and the use of cellular phones.

One of the biggest difficulties faced by schools operating in this sector of the market is finding qualified language teachers who also have sufficient industry knowledge. Sylvia Paucar of Academia del Español Mitad del Mundo in Ecuador, says, "We either recruit fully-trained teachers or train our own staff. We provide ongoing training with a minimum of at least two courses for each teacher each year." However, she

programmes, Gracia Rodriguez, reports that demand is growing and that they are "looking forward to [further] growth in the future".

For schools in newer language travel destinations, however, it can be more difficult to promote business language programmes. In Ecuador, Academia de Español Mitad del Mundo offers Spanish courses for secretaries, the health service and the tourism industry, as well as courses in commercial correspondence and telephone conversation techniques. Sylvia Paucar at the school notes, "there has been no notable growth in demand for specific courses... [because] more information needs to be provided overseas" – about the school and Ecuador in general as a location for business language courses.

Nationality trends

LSP courses are popular with a wide range of nationalities but, as Schillig points out, "Since these courses command a premium fee they are more popular with students or companies which are located in countries with strong economies." At Bell International, Wilkinson says, "We have not experienced any particular nationality predominance. Our participants are mostly European – central, northern, southern and eastern – but we have many clients from the oil-producing countries in north Africa and the Middle East."

Paucar in Ecuador says their LSP courses are most popular with German and Swiss students but have been attracting increasing numbers of British and Scandinavian students in recent years. And at One World Language School in South Africa, there are mainly West Africans and German-speaking clients, as well as some Japanese clients. According to the school's Director, Mark van Niekerk, this has remained the same for some years.

High expectations

The business language and LSP sector is a demanding niche for both schools and agents. Dealing with corporate clients who have high expectations of their service providers means that any shortcomings from agents and schools can prove fatal to their reputations among the corporate community. "We always do a

admits, "It is a problem finding specialised teachers for each area."

In Ireland, Liz Osbourne of Aisling concedes, "If the area is very highly technical, it can pose problems finding material or having a trainer who can handle the subject."

The problem lies in the fact that the teachers must have dual skills, as Schillig points out. "Trainers must not only be skilled and up to date in their specific field but must also be able to teach." To overcome this problem,

Anglo-Continental offers English as a foreign language teaching courses "so we are able to train our trainers", he says.

In contrast, South Africa is in an enviable situation when it comes to finding qualified staff. "South Africa is in recession," says van Niekerk. "Many highly qualified teachers and other technical personnel are without work. Therefore, there is no shortage of applicants for [advertised teaching positions]."

[very careful] needs analysis [of our clients] and keep in close contact with carefully selected schools," says Jorg Bohnsack of specialist agency, Bohnsack M&K in Germany, which sends around 60 per cent of its clients on LSP courses.

As the sector requires considerable resources, it is not an area that has attracted the intense competition among schools experienced in other sectors of the language travel market. "The investment in curriculum and trainers prevents many schools from entering this arena," confirms Schillig.

Marco Pinna, President of the Language Academy in the USA, elaborates further. "[Schools] must have highly specialised faculty and specifically trained administrative staff in order to organise the field trips, visits, meetings and seminars that are an integral part of the English for specific purposes (ESP) experience," he says. As a consequence, Pinna ventures that this sector of the language teaching market "will witness [only] a moderate growth due to the organisational and academic difficulties that schools must face when implementing the programmes".

This sector is also demanding for agents because they have to adapt their marketing approach to attract corporate clients (see overleaf), understand the company's needs and communicate these to the schools. Their partner schools then have to produce flexible and effective programmes taught by teachers who understand the company's business sector.

At the Washington Academy of Languages in the USA, Sherry Schneider explains, "Every [specific purposes] programme is individualised. Curriculum is written to fit the needs of the students – their level, their demands – as well as to meet the objectives of their sponsor. Tours and on-site visits are added at client request, [and] start and end dates, as well as total hours are specified by the client."

Most schools organise site visits for students to enable them to gain first-hand experience of their field in another country. At the Language Academy in the USA, for example, students on the English for law programme meet with lawyers, visit the prison, the sheriff's department and the department of police, as well as attend hearings and lectures on topics such as juvenile criminality.

As clients and their employers expect clearly demonstrable results, LSP classes are generally small. They are often closed groups from one company,

although some schools, such as Aisling in Ireland, combine an open class in the morning with more intensive one-to-one tuition in the afternoons. “[Our] small groups are open classes but are really only suitable for general business issues,” says Liz Osbourne at the school. She argues that this is effective even for those with very specific requirements. “We are finding that even the most highly specialised person needs to cover things like participating in meetings [and] making telephone calls. The combination of small group and one-to-one [lessons] appeals to people so that the more specialised areas can be covered in one-to-one sessions.”

The language level required prior to starting an LSP course is generally quite high, with many schools stipulating at least a low-intermediate level of ability. Of course, the lower the language level, the more limited the scope of the job-related component of the course, as Walker points out. “We can organise specialised courses in practically any [language] level,” he says. “At the lower level, the language input would be limited to very specific job-related situations, for example, a course for telephone operators would concentrate on the language needed for completing specific telephone tasks. Such a course would last three days and would not try to develop a very high degree of grammatical ability.”

Popular business sectors

Most LSP providers cover a wide range of professions in their range of targeted programmes, and the most popular business areas vary from one provider to another depending on their corporate clients. Generally speaking, however, finance, aviation, marketing and legal language courses are often requested. As site visits are often a part of these programmes, it can also depend on what major industries are found in the

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school’s locality. In Germany, Walker at ISD says that technical German is their most popular course because “Daimler Chrysler, Bosch and Porsche are situated here [in Stuttgart] together with the thousands of suppliers and service companies associated with these industry giants”.

Course developments in this sector largely reflect developments in the business world, says Wilkinson. “Language learning needs respond to the growth of new industries and their global marketing initiatives. ▶

Too specialised for most agents?

"There are few agencies that specialise in this [languages for specific purposes] field," laments Marco Pinna, Director of the Language Academy in the USA.

Being a premium-priced, highly specialised sector of the language travel market – which focuses on a completely different target

market from the traditional late-teens to early-twenties students who enrol on general and intensive programmes – only a minority of agencies actively market targeted business programmes to companies.

However, those that do are invaluable to schools. Geoff Hardy-Gould, Managing

Director of Regent Language Training in the UK, says their success in this field is down to their "close working relationships with agents and companies abroad".

Similarly, Fiona Wilkinson at Bell International in the UK, asserts, "We regard our agent relationships as essential to our growth." But she adds, "Many of our agents, and probably potential agents, have yet to tap into the English for special purposes market, having focused their

marketing activity on the general English market for many years."

Agents contemplating moving into this sector must be prepared to do their homework because, as Liz Osbourne of Aisling in Ireland says, "The better [agents] understand what we do, the better they can explain it to clients." Pinna urges agents to "visit the schools and 'live the experience' personally".

Guido Schillig of Anglo-Continental School in the UK

believes that, in order to succeed in this area, it is vital that agents are "close to their local business community". Wilkinson also points out that agents must be prepared to change the way they market their products. "Agents who wish to diversify into this area need to build up different databases... for corporate penetration," she says. "The style of selling would change to corporate presentations and extensive use of local media for media exposure."

Industry growth or evolution depends on global forces and trends. As they change so will the need for improved global communication skills." Bell recently devised a very specific European course after it identified a potential gap in the market. "We discovered a need for courses to help would-be European Union (EU) accession nations acquire the language knowledge and skills required for future EU membership. The Eurospeak course was run in response to this need and was very successful," she says.

Growth prospects

For those who operate in the business language and LSP area, it is likely to continue to be a fruitful sector as targeted career-oriented learning continues to be a major driving force in education. "We have seen a growth in the courses for specific purposes simply

"We believe that this is a spin-off from the globalisation process that has made Spanish necessary at a worldwide level"

because they are more focused and provide participants – who are more motivated themselves – with objectives that meet their career development [goals]," confirms Wilkinson. And, with the growing internationalisation of the business environment, more companies throughout the world will, as Osbourne says, "need to look outside their own language areas in the future". □