

In the business

Business language programmes for working professionals require specialist treatment from the schools that administer the courses as well as the agents who market them. GILLIAN EVANS reports.

“Professionals want to get some knowledge in ‘intercultural communication’ with their business partners”

Despite the fact that executive language programmes require specialist teaching and targeted marketing, their high price tag and rate of repeat bookings make them attractive to many schools and agents. As Carlo Bianchi, Director of The Language Center in Italy reports, their full-immersion language programmes designed for business people account for 30 per cent of their total enrolment but contribute 50 per cent of the school’s annual turnover.

Business people looking for language training overseas are usually interested in concentrated programmes that address all their areas of interest. Courses are generally

run in small groups of no more than six students or one-to-one tuition is offered, or a combination of the two. At Ceran Lingua International, which has language centres in Belgium, France, Spain and the UK, the combined group and private lesson format is the most popular, according to Siân Choma-Peters at the school. “The group lessons are more general but do have a business slant,” she explains, while “clients can select general or more specialised private lessons”. In the one-to-one lessons, executives work on business situations “such as meetings, presentations, negotiations through role-play and simulation activities using the vocabulary specific to their area”.

One-to-one home tuition programmes are also a popular choice for professionals, as maximum contact with the teacher is guaranteed. Andrew Pritchard of the Elizabeth Johnson Organisation in the UK confirms this trend. “We have experienced an increase in demand for very carefully tailored courses for our corporate

Business for students

Another niche within the business language training sector is courses for students who want to improve their language skills in business for future employment. "University students and part-time employees usually regard business language programmes

as an investment in their future and are willing to spend time and money in return for better job opportunities," says Carlo Bianchi at The Language Center in Italy.

BWS Germanlingua in Germany offers both courses for in-service professionals – who generally favour one-to-one tuition

– and students. The latter attend small classes with lessons that focus on certain business areas such as tourism, engineering or medicine, and in some cases include a period of work experience.

Siân Choma-Peters at Ceran reports that the majority of their clients have always been "business people

with business needs" but adds, "we have seen an increase in demand for the language of business and have adapted our programmes accordingly."

Yet at the University of Victoria International Center in Canada, Chris Gambrell reports a drop in student interest for all business programmes.

"I have learned that students feel that it is no longer important to have a credential from a good university for business English if the cost is higher," she says. "They are happy to [do a course at] a private school if the fee is lower. The bottom line is [about] adding the course to their resumé."

clients overseas. We have found that most companies want to see measurable results in a very short period of time and are less and less inclined to release valuable employees for long-term language training."

Despite only being able to devote a relatively short amount of time to a language course overseas, many executive language learners are also keen to get to know the country and its business culture, says Florian Meierhofer from BWS Germanlingua in Germany. "Beside the language teaching, there is a strong demand [for] getting experiences of the German way of life. Roughly speaking, professionals want to get some knowledge in 'intercultural communication' with their German business partners," he asserts.

Mike Abbot at Bell International agrees. "The demand for weekend courses and specifically tailored courses incorporating language and social experiences is on the increase and we are adaptable to these requests as and when they arise," he says.

Professionals also expect a high standard of accommodation and other services. For example, Ceran in the UK

is located in a 19th-century vicarage with five acres of parkland, while students at the Humboldt Institut in Germany, which is set in a castle, benefit from a TV room, sauna and cellar bar. At English in Chester, there is a separate building for the school's executive clients, while accommodation choices include standard or executive-level host families.

Heiko Ahmann at Humboldt Institut explains why this is important. "Executives, who get the rare chance of focusing on learning a language outside their companies – where they would basically still be integrated in the job routine and hardly get a chance to study – want to be immersed in an atmosphere that combines all the necessary facilities for intensive studying with a wide variety of options for rest and relaxation," he says.

Some of the trends in the executive market mirror those of the mainstream language travel market. For example, Bianchi mentions a move towards budget options. As a result, The Language Centre now offers alternative accommodation choices for executives on a tighter budget. "[We now offer] accommodation in families, in private flats and in B&Bs, as opposed to our traditional country houses and hotels in town centres. The quality is the same, whereas the course price is reduced by over 30 per cent."

There is also a trend towards even shorter stays. Bianchi says the average stay at their school has dropped from seven to six days, while, at Ceran, most business clients stay for one week, rather than the two or three weeks that were previously favoured. Choma-Peters explains why. "Clients tell us that they cannot be away from the office for longer but tend to come back for a second stay within a 12-month period." She adds, "Clients who come from further afield tend to stay longer."

Japan and Western European countries, particularly Germany and Switzerland, seem to be the most significant sources of executive clients for English language programmes, although, according to Choma-Peters, numbers from Germany, their biggest market, were down in 2002/03 because of the country's adverse economic climate. "However," she adds, "this trend has reversed in 2005." In the non-English teaching Ceran centres, Choma-Peters also notes a decline in US clients over the last couple of years.

Many sources also report growing numbers from Eastern European countries, and indeed, Meierhofer attributes their school's growth in business enrolments to the enlargement of the European Union (EU) and the ease with which these nationalities can now work in Germany. Choma-Peters believes that, in the future, demand for business language courses will be driven by executives from the new EU countries as they "become more economically competitive". She also earmarks China as having "enormous potential" for the business language sector. However, in the near future, most sources believe the executive language training sector will continue to grow slowly but surely. ●

Agent role in executive recruitment

Marketing language training to executives can be a tricky business. Agents have to focus on the human resources sectors of companies and it may take several presentations to succeed. Because of this, Mike Abbot at Bell International, says, "We deal with agents who recruit only professional clients and they consequently prove to be a good source of students."

Richard Day at English in Chester in the UK believes that agents succeed in this niche only if they market business programmes separately. He states, "Agents who are prepared to promote executive programmes actively are a good source of students. Agents who simply add executive programmes to their portfolio of courses and do not invest in the required promotion are not so effective."

However, it is not easy for agents in this sector as Heiko Ahmann at Humboldt-Institut in Germany – which recruits business students through agents and directly via companies – says. "Recruitment in this sector is tough, both for agencies and [us], simply because companies tend to stick to existing links to language schools and are reluctant to try new ones."

The squeeze on profits at many companies over recent years has also affected demand. Auriga Servizi agency in Italy, which markets business language training direct to companies, conducted a survey last year to gauge interest levels. Gabriella Perfetti says they were surprised at the results, with a high proportion saying that their company did not pay for such training or they thought in-house language training was sufficient.

