

Immersion tactics

Students are increasingly choosing to study on home tuition programmes around the world, attracted by the intensity of the language learning experience and total immersion into a foreign culture. Agents have an important role to play in introducing these courses to their client base, as BETHAN NORRIS discovers.

Home tuition language courses, where a student lives and studies in a teacher's home, are a relatively recent phenomenon in the worldwide language teaching industry and some language destinations are more developed than others in their provision of such programmes. "Five years ago, many students and agents had never even heard of the concept [of home tuition]," states John Hall from Concorde International Home Language Tuition, based in the UK. "Now, particularly for mature business clients, home language tuition is being regarded as the most effective way to increase language skills over a short time."

Promising individual attention from a language teacher 24 hours-a-day, as well as an academic programme that focuses entirely on an individual student's needs, home tuition programmes offer many advantages over traditional classroom-based courses. Ian Josephs from Home Language International, which is based in Monaco and offers tuition in 20 languages in 30 countries, says that a clear advantage of such courses is the fact that stu-

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dents are forced to communicate entirely in the language they are learning at all times.

"The main criticism of language courses is that students mix in groups according to nationality after class and by speaking together they destroy any chance of thinking in the language they are meant to be learning," he says.

Home Language International is one of the founders of the home tuition concept, according to Josephs, and demand from students has grown year on year since the company first started 25 years ago. "The average increase in numbers has only been two or three per cent each year but for us there has never been a decrease," he comments.

The flexible nature of home tuition courses means that their appeal spans a variety of student nationalities, ages and motivations. One of the most noticeable student trends over the last few years has been an increase in interest among students undertaking academic preparation courses before going on to university.

"A fast growing area [for us] is our IELTS and Toeic crash courses that have seen a huge

growth in demand over the last two years," confirms Norman Renshaw at InTuition Languages based in the UK. "[We have also seen an] increase in shorter, one-week courses and more intensive ones – 25 lessons per week."

Hall agrees. "There has been a major increase lately in the number of Chinese students taking longer courses prior to entering English universities or independent schools," he says.

With the Chinese market showing considerable demand for academic preparation courses, Kang Yang from China Connect Co. Ltd in China, says that they are putting a lot of effort into promoting home tuition courses to Chinese students. As well as being a good way for Chinese students to increase their English levels in a short period of time, Yang believes that they also make it "easier for [Chinese] students to overcome the culture shock and to know the British culture better".

Josephs claims that two or three weeks in the teacher's home gives the same or better progress than two or three months in a language school and the total immersion aspect of home tuition courses means they are becoming increasingly popular with those who don't have much time to spare for a language learning trip. Home tuition is, therefore, a popular choice for business clients who may be taking their language course during work time and also certain nationalities, such as the Japanese, who have a cultural reason for taking shorter language courses.

"This can be put down to the limited amount of holiday time given to Japanese workers," says Hall. Ken Johnson, Marketing Director at Unique Academic Holidays (UAH) in Australia, which promotes courses worldwide and places most clients in Australia, New Zealand and the USA, confirms that his mainly Japanese clientele wants "short-term courses to fit in with their short holiday season".

The appeal of living and studying in a family is also a major draw for those keen to immerse themselves in the cultural side of a country, purely for their own pleasure. Barry Haywood from Eurolingua Institute, which offers various home tuition programmes around the world, says that the majority of its home tuition clients – of which the largest nationalities are British, US, Australian, Canadian, German and French – could be categorised as "linguistically-oriented rather than academically-oriented".



He adds, "[Our students] like to have a look around, independently or with their tutor, at the local area with its geographical and historical interests, but their main focus is experiencing the language and cultural aspects of living in a [foreign] family, which is a rare privilege for most people."

The structured and sheltered nature of these programmes has a broad appeal to young language learners and their parents. Alexandra Fletcher from Churchill House School in the UK has noticed a trend for younger and younger students on their home tuition programmes in recent years. "Six years old has been our youngest actual student – though demands for four year olds are fairly frequent, for mother and child courses," she says.

At International Language Homestays, which offers courses in 20 countries, there has also been an increase in interest from junior and teenage learners. The organisation appeals to the junior summer market by providing home tuition courses where juniors can study with other students of their own age. "In English we offer a special summer course for teenagers who wish to share the course with one or two other teenagers of a different nationality," explains Richard Lewis.

Home tuition courses are available throughout the world, from South America and



Asia to Australia and Eastern Europe, although the concept seems to be most well known in European countries. While the English teaching market largely dominates business language tuition and academic preparation courses, Josef Steinfels from Dr Steinfels Sprachreisen agency in Germany observes, "There seems to be no language dominating any other in this sector of tuition."

He adds, "Home tuition lessons are, however, rather dominant in languages and countries which do not have enough experienced language schools. Therefore, exotic languages are very often taught in the home language pattern."

Home tuition courses can be the only option for students wanting to study in a country where few language schools exist. At Eurolingua Institute, increased student demand for less traditional languages has led to an expansion of its home tuition teaching centres into new countries. "There is a striking interest in demand for Russian homestays at our locations in Russia and Ukraine, as well as our new locations in Lithuania and Belarus," reports Haywood.

However, according to Gemma Dominguez from Anglojet Cultural Travel in Spain, England provides the most opportunities for students wanting to study on a home

tuition course. "The number of enterprises offering home tuition in England is really high compared with other countries," she says.

Of all the English-speaking language destinations, the UK has the most developed home

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tuition sector with a large number of UK-based language schools or organisations offering home tuition courses in the UK and further afield. The country has the added advantage of a specific accreditation scheme for home tuition programmes that is run by the British Council. Renshaw believes that this has had a positive effect in developing the sector in the UK. "The accreditation scheme has raised the profile of this type of course and brought it into the mainstream," he asserts. "This growth in awareness has contributed to its increased popularity."

As a relatively new product in the world of language teaching, potential language students are often unaware of the opportunities available in the home tuition sector. Therefore, many providers rely heavily on the work of agents to market their courses overseas. "Agents are invaluable at being able to explain the nature and advantages of home tuition courses to students, particularly when students who would benefit enormously from this type of tuition had not previously considered or were unaware of the possibility," says Kate Hargreaves from Living English in the UK.

Renshaw agrees. "Our courses are designed to be personal so it is better that they are sold on a personal level," he says. "Also they are quite labour-intensive to sell and a local person who knows the product is in a far better position to promote the courses and instil confidence in the students than it is for us to do that over the Internet or telephone."

According to Johnson at UAH, agents are becoming keener to promote such courses too. "Education and travel agents are becoming

more interested in promoting the programme and this has caused more interest through competition in their brochure advertising," he says.

However, while agents may be invaluable for introducing students to the concept of home tuition courses, Yang points out that schools could be doing more to promote their home tuition courses themselves. "Many schools have one-to-one home tuition language courses printed on their brochures but not all the schools are willing to promote this programme particularly. In order to benefit the students, we will try our best to introduce these courses to China," he says.

The increased work involved in advising students about these courses may also be deterring some agents from including home tuition providers in their portfolios. Haywood comments, "I regret that agents play very little part in our marketing, alas. I never understand why because, commercially speaking, these are high value sales. We shall be delighted to hear from any agents who can commit to the service levels required to do this kind of work." □

Ensuring high standards

Ensuring the standards of accommodation and tuition in home tuition courses can be difficult as many organisations offer home tuition centres that are spread throughout one or many countries. As no international accreditation scheme covering home tuition courses exists, agents and students have to rely on other methods to assess the quality standards of the programme they are interested in.

"I check if the organisation with whom I work is a member of an official organisation that could ensure that the enterprise is legally established," says Gemma Dominguez from Anglojet Travel in Spain. "There is no specific accreditation for organisations that work in this sector but they could use the accreditation of Fiyto, ABLIS, Unosel, Arels etc."

However, Ian Josphehs, from Home Language International in Monaco, doubts the usefulness of accreditation schemes in this particular sector of the language teaching industry. "We belong to Souffle but I do not have much respect for accreditation schemes for home tuition," he says. "We operate in so many countries and in so many different areas within each country that no inspector could properly cover them all or even a representative sample. The agents who recruit students are far better judges of the services we provide than any inspectors could possibly be."

Josef Steinfels from Dr Steinfels Sprachreisen in Germany agrees that accreditation schemes cannot guarantee top quality teaching in this sector. He says agencies should ensure standards by having strict partnerships with providers that guarantee students are provided with the service that is offered in their brochures. "We believe that this kind of partnership is of a higher value than any accreditation scheme," he comments.

In the UK, however, Alexandra Fletcher from Churchill House School believes that accreditation of home tuition courses is important for some students. The school is accredited by the English in Britain accreditation scheme run by the British Council, which has particular criteria for home tuition providers. "It has a reassuring effect on some of our clients, who search for just such an accreditation scheme as a guarantee of high standards, qualified teachers and good general standards of service," she comments.