

# High-tech learning

Computer-based language learning, either as a supplement to a classroom-based programme or as a course on its own, offers students the flexibility to learn what they want when they want. GILLIAN EVANS investigates the opportunities available in the computer-based learning sector.

The active and natural situations created in a classroom cannot be entirely replaced by electronic learning," says Nici Johnson at the Anglo-German Institute in Germany. That said, computers and electronic learning are playing an increasingly important part in language courses, adding to the "blended" learning philosophy of using different learning tools and methods to create an effective and stimulating language course.

There are two main ways in which computers are used in language learning. These days, most language schools have computer labs where students can practise their language skills on CD-Roms or specially designed language programmes. This is known as computer-assisted language learning or Call (see below right). Then there are, of course, online language courses, or e-learning.

"Internet-delivered courses offer students unlimited flexibility in all sorts of areas," says Michael Twide at Santillana Net Languages, based in Spain. "For example, learners can make their own decisions about what gets learnt, when and where, [and] how to organise their own learning [and] the pace of learning." The aim of online courses is, quite simply, to give students everything but the physical classroom. Most good e-learning courses have video and audio facilities, as well as an online tutor who is responsible for each student. By all accounts, demand for online courses is high. Online course provider, Parlo, claims to have over two million users.

It is not surprising then that more and more real language schools are entering the virtual world. "[From this year], Berlitz [is offering] a set of CD-Rom/web hybrid course levels for advanced beginners to low-intermediate students," explains Rob Long, Manager of E-Learning at Berlitz. "The aim of the course will be to allow people who are inclined towards self-study to learn English using an integrated skill approach... and courses include an 'eCoach' who will provide feedback."

For some schools, the real and virtual classrooms are also converging, with a mix of both being offered to students. Marshall University's Learning English for Academic Purposes (Leap) programme in the USA recently introduced an online course from Distance Learning Inc to provide students with unlimited access to language training. "The interactive community building boasts features

such as forums, chat rooms and pen pals, [which] are very beneficial to students," comments Clark Egnor, Director of Leap.

Going one step further, Ceran Lingua International, which has schools in several countries around the world, has gone into partnership with virtual language provider, Net Learn Languages, to offer the Cer@net Package. This includes a one-week intensive residential course at one of Ceran Lingua's centres and 30 hours of live online lessons with NetLearn Languages. Similarly, Kästner Kolleg Sprachen in Germany offers an online/offline package through its own web-based language provider, Virtualingua.

At present, many online language providers are concentrating their marketing efforts on schools, but online courses also represent a golden opportunity for agents to expand their services and earn extra revenue. Santillana Net Languages, for example, offers agents a commission through its partnership programme.

"[Many] language school agents that specialise in sending students abroad... are interested in adding our courses to their catalogues as the courses are ideal preparation for students who are planning to take a course abroad," says Twide. "They also enable students to continue to study when they get home – which is often when their motivation to keep up their new skills is highest."

Santillana Net Languages, which currently has 38 agent-partners in 14 different countries, provides its representatives with a customised version of its website which they can use for promotional purposes. "All the agent has to do is add a link from their own website to this mirror site and then process the enquiries and bookings as they come through," says Twide.

He believes that agents have an important role to play in the promotion of e-learning. "Most agents have a database of clients and contacts that they have built up over the years," he says. "These are all potential clients."

## Computers in the classroom

*Computer-assisted language learning (Call) is usually offered as a self-study option at language schools, rather than an in-class component of the course. Nici Johnson of Anglo-German Institute in Germany is typical when she reports, "We don't use Call in our courses as such, [but we do] offer free Internet access to all our students outside of class hours plus a supplementary CD-Rom for each level, with which students can revise the syllabus covered in class."*

*Language schools have different views over the usefulness of Call as part of the language learning process. Brian North, Head of Academic Coordination at Eurocentres, says, "Most classes have a teacher-led lesson with the Learning Centre computers once a week, to show them what is available and how to use it." However, he*

*continues, "Computer-led classroom lessons are so rare as to be negligible, even in our most high-tech school [which is] Washington DC/Alexandria. In Washington, all classrooms have their own computer. This is sometimes used online for project work, but in general, the suitability of computers for whole-class classroom teaching has been exaggerated."*

*John Langdon at Dominion English Schools in New Zealand asserts that, although Call is an important feature of the language teaching market these days, it is "just another tool, like textbooks are a tool and whiteboards are a tool". Dominion has, however, introduced a Call component to its afternoon classes. "I think everyone everywhere under 30 expects [to use computers in the classroom]," says Langdon.*

*Berlitz has long used Call on its courses and Rob Long, Manager of E-learning at Berlitz, has no doubt about its effectiveness. "In most cases, customers who use Call programmes tell us that they improve their language skills more quickly and to a greater degree than they believe they would have done, had they chosen not to make use of the software," he says.*

*Agents, such as Jean-Daniel Jermora at Link-Study agency in Switzerland, report that clients generally do not ask about Call. However, many schools say the Swiss are among the student nationalities keen to use computer labs. North at Eurocentres says, "Swiss [students] tend to be good independent learners and Koreans are often going on to university [and] tend to want to put in the hours." This may be an indication that Call will become the norm in the 21st century.*

