

Real opportunity

Virtual language courses are a valuable supplement to a language travel programme overseas, and can provide agents with the opportunity to extend their product range. GILLIAN EVANS reports.

Learning a language in the country in which it is spoken is undoubtedly the most effective way of picking up new language skills, but with the growth in Internet usage and advancing technology, "virtual" language courses have an important role to play in language teaching.

There are many types of virtual language course available, from the broad generic online courses to more sophisticated programmes that include lessons with a personal tutor. Eric Baber at NetLearn Languages explains, "We use the Internet as a means of connecting a student with a teacher, live, at a prearranged time. Once connected they can speak to each other using a headset with a microphone, can see each other if they have webcams, and work on-screen together on a whiteboard."

This type of course aims to simulate a real class experience, and online course providers are keen to stress that students do not study in isolation. "Whenever a student logs on to our site, we guarantee them a spot in a small group discussion with a qualified experienced native-speaking English teacher within the hour," explains Marco Urso, President of EF's virtual classroom, Englishtown Italy.

With advances in technology making quality online language programmes more accessible to users, Stephen Cervieri at Distance Learning Inc (DLI) argues that the demand for such programmes will continue to grow. "Already, virtual classrooms are possible with a US\$29 camera meaning that students can study and see their teachers live. Such quality will attract more students, more users will drive down prices and lower prices will encourage more students."

Rob Long at Berlitz agrees. "There is no question that [virtual language learning] is a growth area," he says. As well as appealing to individual language learners, Long adds, "More and more global corporations are demanding online learning options to help them meet the needs of their diverse and geographically dispersed employee populations."

The important role virtual language courses play in the language travel industry is borne out by the number of players that now offer such products, sometimes in partnership with online providers. NetLearn Languages has developed a language travel package with Ceran Lingua International, which includes lessons at a Ceran school combined with

NetLearn's online course. Similarly Virtualingua uses its online provision either as a stand-alone product or in conjunction with language courses at its sister company, Kästner Kolleg Sprachen in Germany. And many online providers are keen to market their wares through language travel agents.

"Language travel agents are a great source of online course sales," asserts Cervieri. "DLI can work to network them with our large clients or to affiliate them with our own consumer site." DLI offers agents a commission, depending on "performance, who [agents] are affiliated with and level of involvement", according to Cervieri.

Notwithstanding, language travel agents have been slow to enter this business area. Some agents are keen to explore the potential of virtual language courses but have, in the past, lacked the information they require. Others are sceptical of its attraction to their market (see right). However, it could just be a matter of time before virtual courses feature alongside traditional programmes in most language travel agents' portfolios. Travel company, eTrav, which organises travel and cultural itineraries for groups, has merged with online course provider Parlo.com. "We believe we are unique, in having language instruction and travel both within one company," says Marcos



Dinnerstein at Parlo Inc. Being able to offer its customers online courses adds value to their services, explains Dinnerstein, "both in advance of travelling as well as to re-enforce the language skills practised on the trip."

This may indeed be an indication of how the language travel market could develop. As Cervieri says, "E-learning is really young as far as Internet applications go. We encourage as many partners [as possible] to jump on the bandwagon today."

What the agents say

"I am starting to find out more information and read more about [virtual courses] since I definitely see a wonderful opportunity to promote it, not only among prospective students for courses abroad but for those who come back after [a study abroad trip] and need to keep the level they achieved."

Mariannelly Nunez, Travel & Learn, Chile

"At the moment we do not sell online language courses but I think it is a very interesting service we could offer in the future."

Marco, Ageviaggi, Italy

"I think there is a potential market for [virtual courses] in Austria, especially for those who either need to prepare for a language course abroad and probably many who do not have enough time to go abroad."

Andrea Meier, Head of Language Department, STA Travel Vienna, Austria

"In the big cities of Brazil, language centres are all over the place and big chains have been in the market for many years. They do big marketing on TV and in newspapers. These schools represent tough competition to the distance learning courses. Only if distance-learning courses proved to be better would they stand a chance [of being successful in Brazil]. In general you would need to do a lot of marketing for these courses, and if only educational agencies sell them, it would take years to get a foothold in the market. Overall, we think it is not very interesting for us to offer

distance learning courses right now."

Michael Joop, ICCE - Intercambio Cultural e Cursos no Exterior, Brazil

"We do not market online language training. In France, the fad of [e-learning] is wearing off because users learnt the hard way that there is no miracle way to learn a language but to study it face to face with a teacher. We will not offer such courses in the future because most newspapers acknowledge that e-learning altogether proved to be a very expensive flop."

Pierre Richaud, Formalangues, France