

perfect place

Schools and agents need to ensure students fit in well with the educational environment and when they arrive. JANE VER

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NON SMITH reports.

Utopian as it may sound, the “perfect placement” is what every student is hoping for, and what every good agent and language school is striving to achieve. Such perfection is unlikely to come about by accident, but is possible only as a result of much care and attention on the part of both the recruiting agent and the chosen language school.

Horror stories are told every year at workshops and industry events – about the student who gets beaten up by local youths, or students who are stranded at the airport waiting for their pick-up, or the recent story about taxi drivers targeting international students and charging them outrageous prices for a lift to their school after explaining that they have been sent to meet them.

Although more common problems can, of course, be less dramatic, agencies and schools need to work in close collaboration to avoid any of the pitfalls – however large or small – that can occur during a language travel trip. Among schools, there is a general perception that one of the most important things an agent can do to ensure the success of a student placement is to provide good preparation for dealing with the cultural differences they will encounter in the host country.

In reality, important as this is, the agent’s role begins long before this. One major facet of the agent’s job is to make sure that they have

a sound knowledge of all the schools they deal with. “To ensure top quality counselling services, we visit the partner schools abroad personally whenever possible,” says Brazilian agent, Helena Mirabile, of Helena Mirabile Intercâmbios & Cursos No Exterior. Many agents regard familiarisation trips as essential not only to gather factual information about schools, but also to get a feel for their atmosphere and individual character.

Agents can take other practical measures to ensure that partner schools meet certain basic standards. “We ask the education organisation of each country for their advice on the ranking of institutions,” reports Nguyen Thu Huyen, Vice Counselling Manager at Baltic International Education Services Company (Biesco) in Vietnam.

Personalised placement

Armed with this type of basic knowledge, the agent, as the student’s first point of contact, is responsible for matching them to suitable options and for making them aware of the implications of their choices. The success of the placement depends ultimately upon meeting students’ aims and expectations. In order to achieve this, the initial counselling process is crucial. As Austrian agent, Helga Probst

“Students who were unhappy because they found their course too easy or difficult had their problem solved after talking to the academic adviser and were relocated into the appropriate level for one skill or another”

Helena Mirabile, Helena Mirabile Intercâmbios & Cursos No Exterior, Brazil

of Europe Exchanges, points out, “Each [client] is different, and the challenge for an agent is to find the appropriate school for [them].”

Mirabile explains how she approaches this. “Each of our students goes through a detailed personal interview, so that we can figure out [their] goals and expectations. According to each student’s characteristics, such as age, personality, lifestyle, health, personal interests and goals, we match him/her with the best partner school available.” She adds that students are always given an alternative for every option offered to them, “so they can make their decision based on solid information we have provided for them”.

Kelly Franklin, Director of International Services at Maryville College in the USA and President of the American Association of Intensive English Programs (AAIEP), underlines that it is important to “find out if [students] prefer a family-type atmosphere at their school, or [if they] prefer to be one small face in a large crowd, find out if they need bars, restaurants, excitement, to be happy, or [if they] just want a quiet and safe atmosphere so they can easily make friends and study hard.”

“If agents give students good choices,” he adds, “based on the student’s expressed desires, they will have done a good job.” The agent must also make clear exactly what is being offered. As Stefanie Neubrand of German school, the Humboldt-Institut, highlights, “You ▶

need the right students for the right courses. For our institute, for example, it is very important that our agents make clear that we offer highly intensive German courses... in very small groups. If this point isn't clear, it might happen that students join [enrol on] our courses with wrong expectations."

Part of the selection process when it comes to choosing the right school for a student will involve accommodation type and the activities programme. Agents should be well equipped to suggest advantages and disadvantages about types of course and accommodation in each location, and most agents also make an assessment as to the current language level of the client and what level of fluency will be feasible in the time they have available to study.

Accurate orientation

Agents need to bear in mind that the initial aims and expectations of students may not always be totally realistic. They need to make sure that students are fully aware of what to expect – in terms of the school and accommodation and possible progress made in language learning. Schools also appreciate it when agents make the effort to paint an accurate picture of life in a foreign country. "The best [agents]," says Sarah Freear, Marketing Manager at Languages International in New Zealand, "are those who portray a realistic picture of the destination country, and hold orientation days or show videos." The best way to prepare a student, she ventures, is to give accurate information – "if the agent is unsure about something, they should make every effort to find out before the student leaves their home country".

Franklin in the USA endorses Freear's comments on orientation. While confirming that the school itself provides this for new stu-

"I think when students [arrive at] their chosen language school, the school should ask them to do the English test again for all skills"

Nguyen Thu Huyen, Biesco, Vietnam

dents, he says, "I do feel this is one area that the agent can really help on, by discussing common culture-shock differences with new clients about to go overseas." In Ireland, Richard Masterson at the University of Cork's Language Centre concurs. "Most important is to show students actual videos of the type of language classes they will be attending in the host country and [provide] information about the way of life and social mores in host families," he stresses.

Nevertheless, there is only so much that any agent can do towards providing the "perfect placement". It goes without saying that, without high quality schools for them to recommend, agents – however conscientious – would be unable to succeed in this objective.

Every aspect of a language school's provision can affect the success of a student's stay. But language schools themselves frequently point to "friendliness" and "personal attention" as the most important factors in achieving that elusive perfect placement.

Pamela Caicedo, Marketing Director at Idiomas Si! based in Malaga and Alicante, Spain, emphasises, "We offer personal attention. We have created a familiar environment where the students feel free to talk to our staff or even complain." At France Homestays in France, Isabelle Conte adds, "[Our] teachers...have been chosen not only on their aptitude as a good teacher but also because they are friendly and make people confident in themselves, allowing them to speak easily and improve their French."

"In our homestay programme," she continues, "our families are selected because they know how to explain and teach French, but also because they're very friendly people and [are] not doing this just for the money but because they love being in contact with [students]." Schools firmly believe that a good language programme is one where the students are feel happy, confident and well supported.

Common problems

Many of the common problems associated with language travel are those that might occur on any trip overseas. Homesickness is not unusual, especially among young students, but, "Since we offer plenty of leisure activities and well selected supervisors, this

normally passes by quickly," says Stefanie Neubrand of the Humboldt-Institut in Germany.

Food can be a more persistent problem, when it differs significantly from the cuisine of the home country. Accommodation can also be problematic, according to

Mary Fitzpatrick, Manager of Berlitz Language Centre in Dun Laoghaire, Ireland, because students often expect hotel standards. She comments, "One student thought he should be able to dictate meal times, and did not understand that staying with a family involves a certain degree of compromise in this respect."

Successful adaptation

Good student support services may be achieved in a number of ways. One way is by using agents based at the student's destination. Friends Canada Dot Com is a case in point. This company specialises in placing students in high school programmes in certain parts of Canada. It also provides full extra-curricular activities programmes and support. The company's range of functions extends from student pick-ups, screening host families, arranging parties and excursions to dealing with problems and sending birthday cards.

However, most schools deal with these areas themselves. At Queen's University School of English in Canada, Martha McIntyre relates, "We have a well defined protocol for problem-solving regarding student issues," and a certified psychologist is employed as welfare officer to help students with personal and academic issues. McIntyre adds, "We that feel having a "welfare officer" is a definite value-added service".

A contrasting approach is taken by some language schools that explain they organise the welfare role to be shared across all staff members, rather than isolating the task from other areas of supervision. This approach means that students have a choice of who they can turn to, but it is important that they feel secure about who they can talk to and when.

McIntyre believes that her school's high level of support for its students is crucial. "One aspect of our programming, which has been particularly successful, is the hiring of 'monitors' (Queen's University students) who act as the social and cultural guides for our students," she explains. "In addition, we provide information and support for the students before they arrive and throughout their pro-

gramme. As a result, many students – more than 50 per cent – stay for more than one programme.”

Hans Seelhorst, Director of abc-multilingua – Deutsch in Hannover, in Germany, believes there are three key areas that schools must pay attention to, to ensure the success of a placement. First, he says, “Teaching must be professional, convincing, successful.” Second, “Accommodation must be right and the people there must be

really nice. If students don’t feel good in their accommodation,” he adds, “it will be very hard to make them feel good with their stay, even with the most fantastic classes.” His third point is “a nice and cool leisure programme”.

For Freear, the attention to detail “starts at the very beginning, at enrolment”. She explains, “Since we started pre-testing for all our courses other than General English, we have seen an improvement in matching students’ expectations. Our pre-testing and entry testing incorporate validated self-assessment, so that we have a range of information feeding into the placement decision – a grammar score, an interview rating and the student’s own assessment of their [linguistic] ability. As a result, it is very rare that our students feel they are misplaced at entry”.

Correct placement is a complex and sensitive issue that sometimes requires non-standard solutions. “I think it is not okay to put students just into pre-defined levels, which is often done by schools,” states Seelhorst. He recalls a situation that arose in his own school, where there were three German language students who technically

Many other problems are rooted in misunderstandings that come from cultural differences. Fabian Bryner, Global Language Development Manager at STA Travel, says, “We have found that students from some of the Western countries in particular who are used to very high standards of living have

similar high expectations when they go abroad to learn a language.” He says the key to successful assimilation is “honest counselling”.

Sarah Freear at Languages International in New Zealand adds, “Usually the very newest markets to develop present the most problems early on, because

there is a lack of knowledge about New Zealand in their home country,” she says. “However, these issues usually sort themselves out quickly once we get to know the agent better.”

According to Helena Mirabile, of Helena Mirabile Intercâmbios & Cursos No Exterior in Brazil, a common cause of problems is

students beginning their course on a date that is not one of the school’s scheduled start dates. Students beginning their classes on a scheduled start date benefit from the orientation provided, and tend to have a better experience as a result. “‘Unscheduled’ students – in spite of their sometimes high

intermediate or advanced language skills – almost always tend to feel lost, and certainly feel unhappy during their stay,” she says.

Not all cultural problems are so easily resolved. According to Martha McIntyre at Queen’s University School of English in Canada, some students “have challenges adjusting

of them taught separately, which... ensured that each of them made good progress, which would have been doubtful if we had taught them together.”

Such a solution may not always be possible, and “the perfect placement” will almost always be an ideal rather than everyday reality. However, it is this combination of attention to detail and

“Agents in general should make students aware that they are about to become immersed in another culture and that this will take flexibility and ability to adapt to different situations, but that it is exciting, fun and rewarding at the same time”

Anne de Alvear, Spanish Language and Culture Centre of EIL, Ecuador

were total beginners. The first was a young English woman who had listened to her grandmother speaking German, but never replied in German. She had previously learned French in school. The second was a Vietnamese student who teaches English at home and had “a very difficult teacher personality”, while the third was a Thai student who had never learned a foreign language before. “There was no way to join them in a responsible manner,” he explains. “I had each

flexibility on the part of schools that will go a long way towards achieving the perfect placement. If the agent has taken the same approach, then so much the better. Best of all is when schools and agents work together in close partnership. As Freear puts it, “The agents who know us and know what type of student suits our school best have the happiest students!” □

to a Western model of education, which is participatory and student-centred, and this could be a result of poor preparation, maturity and other factors”.

The course itself can also be a source of other types of problem. “Some students are not necessarily aware of their level, which may create unrealistic expectations,”

says Elodie Chapaux of Belgian language school chain, Ceran Lingua International. “The role of the tutor is, then, to set up, together with the student, realistic objectives.”

There can also be problems with a student who, as Pierre Richaud of French language school, Formalangues, puts it, “is

eaten up by his desire to reach the goals he has set”. Such a student, under the impression that he will fail, is likely to do just that. “The Director of Studies will then try to make the student understand that time and practice is the very answer to his problem, and that he should not judge his ability to learn a language after a

couple of weeks of tuition,” Richaud explains.

With the best will in the world, problems will always arise, and it is usually the job of the language school to ensure that they are sorted out. Agents are normally called upon only in the last resort. However, one common problem reported by language schools is that

of students failing to let them know they have a problem! “With Asian students particularly this is a problem,” says Kelly Franklin at Maryville College in the USA. “We now have in our handbook in several places the important message: ‘If you have a problem, tell someone on our staff.’”