

Business executives and students keen to gain an advantage in their field choose specialist and targeted language training programmes. Expectations are high, as clients want cutting-edge technology, sophisticated learning packages and teachers with up-to-date knowledge of the field. AMY BAKER reports.



race for success

As the language travel industry becomes increasingly responsive to the more exacting needs of its clientele, so too are a growing number of language teaching centres developing their business language courses and specialist training programmes. Not only do busy executives rely on fast-track business language programmes to bring them up to speed with their language needs, but students keen to enter a specific career are choosing specialist language courses to give them a competitive edge in the employment market.

“We usually receive executives who [enrol] individually, and students interested in [general business or a specific area],” says Veronica Gomez of Instituto Mexico Americano de Cultura (Imac) in Mexico, which offers a range of specialist business courses such as Spanish for business and finance, Spanish for medical personnel and Spanish for law enforcement. Antonella Viri, of CTS Viaggi in Italy, confirms this. Most of her clients requesting business language programmes or specific courses are “usually students who have already got their university degree and are approaching their first job, or [they have] their first [job] and career expectations.”

Whether in employment or not, all students enrolling on these courses expect highly professional and targeted course content, and many have clear ideas about what they want to achieve. Gillian Rodrigues at Eurocentres, which has business training centres in the UK and USA, says that typical student expectations include “an immediate and tangible improvement in performance”. This includes “generally improved oral and aural proficiency and effective writing skills; an increased awareness of global business activities and corporate and national cultures, which [students] gain from contact with their fellow participants; and improved learning strategies and advice on how to continue their studies”.

Language providers have to keep on their toes to ensure that they keep pace with ever-changing client demand. It looks likely that competition will intensify too, as more schools are considering joining the throng of institutions providing specialist provision. “We will be starting a business English programme next year,” says Dan Dycke, Director of Comox Valley

International College in Canada. "It will be combined with relaxing and enjoyable activities such as instruction in golfing, skiing and dinghy sailing. We are also investigating some other activities, however, all of this is still on the drawing board."

As well as additional provision such as social activities – which Rodrigues says are included in the price of a package at Eurocentres, along with a taxi pick-up service, a ticket booking service and a secretarial service – the most up-to-date language learning

"Extensive Internet and email facilities, free of charge, are essential. And clients expect mature teachers with some knowledge of business. Credibility is a major factor"

technology and teachers with relevant experience are expected. "Classroom aids such as Powerpoint are now expected by many clients," says Tim Bowen, Director of Executive Programmes at language school chain, Embassy CES. "Extensive Internet and email facilities, free of charge, are essential. [And] clients expect mature teachers with some knowledge of business. Credibility is a major factor in this sector."

Agent Michel Bichri, of MLC International in Finland, who specialises in placing business executives overseas, stresses that the relevant experience of a teacher is imperative. "It is most important that [teachers] have a wide and good knowledge of international business and what happens in this fast global market," he says. "The teacher must be a specialist and a generalist. A pedagogue is not enough." Shane Wilkinson, Managing Director of Bournemouth Busi-

ness School International (BBSI) in the UK, says that the main difficulty in providing targeted business programmes is "finding appropriately qualified and experienced teaching staff".

As well as expert language tuition, clients expect an enriched knowledge of the cultural, economic and social conditions in their country of study and field of interest. Interaction with local companies can be an important way of achieving this goal. "We have a constant programme of visits to both local and more specialised locations and businesses, which we regard as an essential part of the success of any training course," says Wilkinson. Laura Gallegos, of the Colorado School of English in the USA, adds, "We organise field trips every Friday. [For example], the students in the 'Just for lawyers' programme observe court cases on Friday."

Agents say that such trips and relevant site visits are important as they immerse their clients in a particular business environment and heighten their awareness of cultural customs. "Students should have the opportunity to visit local companies," says Graciela Moscato of Zenitur in Argentina. "They have to learn how to give a speech or presentation and have the possibility of meeting [local employees] as well." Vladimir Yankin, of Fakel Tour in Russia, emphasises that aside from such meetings, it is important that there are realistic business scenarios involved in specialist training programmes. "Participation in brain storming [sessions] and sometimes in negotiations is very important," he says, "to make sure that our clients can really be involved in business functions."

Typical elements that might make up a course include presentation skills, negotiating skills, listening strategies, report writing, vocabulary building and

Examples of specialist training

"We have a group of 20 Japanese trainee nurses from Kyoto arriving for a two-week programme. During the first week of the programme they study English in the morning and enjoy cultural and sightseeing trips in the afternoon. In the second week, during the morning, they do volunteer work at an Auckland rest home and study English again in the afternoons. The programme will provide them with both the opportunity to study English and also the chance to experience another country's nursing style."

Vanessa Trethewey, AIS St Helens, New Zealand

"We offer a six-day English and cultural development course for employees of major museums in France. In

addition to classroom-based language lessons, this programme includes an afternoon of work-shadowing at a London museum when they meet and work alongside a counterpart; a series of lectures on certain aspects of art given by specialist lecturers; and a number of accompanied outside excursions to sites of important cultural interest with a specialist guide."

Gillian Rodrigues, Eurocentres, UK

"As many cities [with large Hispanic communities] face demand for higher numbers of police officers, fire fighters, parole officers and social workers who are fluent in the Spanish language, we have designed a course that specifically targets their very unique language needs.

Studies have shown that crime and violence significantly decrease as the level of communication increases in a community."

Veronica Gomez, Instituto Mexico Americano de Cultura, Mexico

"Germany's print media, the most important radio and TV stations as well as multimedia groups will be introduced in our German for journalists programme. The course backs up German skills like telephoning, information gathering, skim reading, drafting short exposes and manuscripts as well as interviewing [techniques]. If requested, visits to editorial offices in Berlin can be arranged."

Dorothee Rubrecht, GLS Sprachenzentrum, Germany

Recruitment methods

Penprapa Vudhivate of Pasa agency in Thailand is typical of many agencies when she reports that less than 10 per cent of her clients request specialist or business language programmes.

Daisuke Yamamoto of Ryugaku Times agency in Japan reports a similar 15 per cent figure.

While agencies can provide a regular stream of clients for targeted language courses – especially students who are not yet in employment – many schools involved in the business sector report that client recruitment is by no means as straightforward. Some clients are already in employment and best reached through other means. “The main difficulty [in this sector] is that executive clients do not normally book through agents, who are the traditional source of [English language] students,” says

Tim Bowen, Director of Executive Programmes at Embassy CES. “They either come from overseas schools or directly.” Bowen points out, interestingly, that it is very difficult, time-consuming and often futile to try to target the decision-maker within a company itself. “Large overseas language schools that teach company students in situ are a much more fruitful source [of students].”

Other schools point to established relationships with specialist language travel agents as their main source of students, while Dorothee Rubrecht of GLS Sprachenzentrum in Germany, which receives “professional” students from a wide range of countries, highlights recruitment tools including the Internet, PR efforts, agents met via workshops and word-of-mouth recommendation. She explains, “We do in-house

teaching for multinational companies here in Germany, and they often refer their foreign partners to us, as well as their staff.”

Shane Wilkinson, at Bournemouth Business School International in the UK, points to word-of-mouth recommendation “on the basis of our existing reputation” as well as a network of contacts, while Veronica Gomez, of Instituto Mexico Americano de Cultura in Mexico, says, “We market our programmes over the Internet and this has proven to be extremely successful.”

Clearly, schools need to employ a variety of recruitment methods in order to maintain high student numbers. In Canada, the CEC Network, which represents Canadian institutions, has capitalised on this need for diverse recruitment tactics by launching an inaugural

“Global Training Forum” in China, “to promote the contract training capabilities of Canadian education institutions for Chinese government agencies, state-owned enterprises, private-sector companies and academic institutions”.

However, there is still room for agents successfully to expand in the field. Many report that they are keen to find out about new business and specialist programmes, and point to the press and workshops as being the best sources of information. “We usually find out about good business-oriented products during workshops,” says Andrea Pinotti at CI Central de Intercambio in Brazil, while Tasha Lewis of International Connections Consulting in the USA says she reads, “*Language Travel Magazine* and newspapers on the Internet, along with other business and education magazines”.

language training for meetings. According to Bowen at Embassy CES, clients are increasingly looking for a rapid improvement in spoken fluency and listening skills as their main goal. “Very few ask for specialised vocabulary,” he says. “Most need to refine skills such as making presentations and dealing with questions. Occasionally, we are asked for very specific objectives such as report writing, but this is increasingly rare.” Rodrigues agrees, but adds that because of the increasing use of email, there is a growing requirement for business writing.

While closed group courses offer maximum possibility to set the agenda in terms of what components are included in a course, many providers testify that open groups are preferred, whereby students can work in a multilingual environment and meet fellow students from a range of different countries. Moscato in Argentina agrees. “I am not interested in offering closed groups, because I believe multinational groups are better for the students.”

David Horner, Director of Studies at the Horner School of English in Ireland, explains that at his school, mostly open groups are offered, and students can join a small group business course on any Monday during the year. However, efforts are made to cater for each group’s specific needs by allowing a degree of autonomy in selecting course content. “Our course has a set curriculum with a number of core business skills and optional topics,” he explains. “The core business skills such as meetings and presentations must be covered, and the optional topics such as marketing brands and advertising, or management styles, can be included if the group feels they would

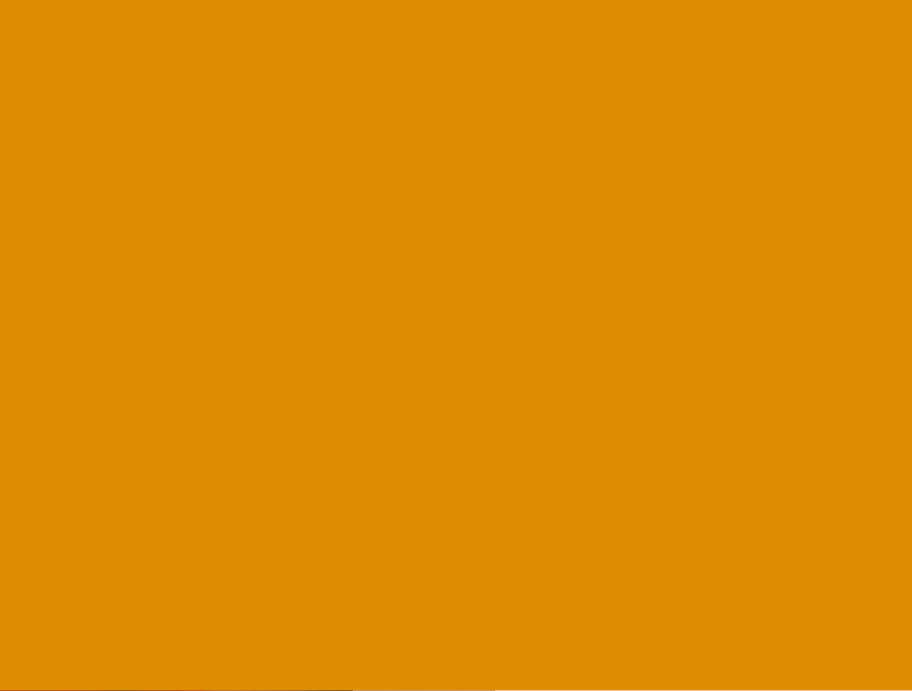
be of value. In this way, we achieve a good balance of content.” He adds that training evolves over time, depending on feedback from previous clients, regular contact with agents and as much advance information as possible about visiting students.

Closed groups are still catered for in this sector, as well as clients requiring one-to-one tuition, which are the two types of business programme offered by Inlingua in Malta, says Kathleen Cremona. According to Scott Anderson, Marketing Manager at SES Folkestone in the UK, closed groups tend to be more common for specific courses arranged on demand, “such as English for military personnel”. It is also

“Participation in brain storming sessions and sometimes in negotiations is very important, to make sure that our clients can really be involved in business functions”

likely that different products appeal to students of different nationalities. According to Wilkinson, at BBSI, where only 10 per cent of groups are closed, the Middle East shows particular demand for such tailor-made programmes.

In terms of nationality trends in the business sector, the distance between the language teaching destination and the student’s country of origin can be a determining factor, as business clients who are already employed often have strict time schedules to take into account. According to Vanessa Trethewey, Media Liaison Officer at AIS St Helens in New Zea



land, there are a high number of Asian students enrolling at the school. “[Our] largest number of students is Chinese, followed by Korean, then Japanese,” she says. In the UK and Ireland, schools point to Western and Eastern Europe as strong markets, as well as the Far East, while Rodrigues reports that in the USA, “South America shows the strongest demand, followed by Japan and European countries”. Christopher Gas, at University College of the Cariboo in Canada, highlights Brazil, Japan and China as strong provider countries, while in Mexico, Gomez says, “Because of the geographic availability, we receive most of our students from the United States.” But she adds, “Recently, we have hosted several students from Japan, the Netherlands and Canada.”

Although agents are not the only source of students for specialist and business language training

“I believe that the demand for this market will increase as more people find themselves with limited time to accomplish numerous goals”

programmes (see page 31), they play an important role when it comes to destination choice, as they recommend a diverse spread of countries to prospective business course students. “We recommend all countries to our clients, depending on their language needs,” says Tasha Lewis at International Connections Consulting in the USA, who says 90 per cent of her clients request specialist language training programmes. Andrea Pinotti at CI Central de Intercambio in Brazil lists 11 countries, from Argentina and South Africa to the UK and USA, as destinations recommended for business programmes. Nevertheless, cost also plays a significant part in a client’s decision, according to Joe H Chang, Director of New Ivy Overseas Education Center in Korea. “[We recommend countries] lower in price and better for short courses,” he says. “We usually prefer Canada and Australia.”

Moscato in Argentina says she suggests the UK first, “but some students only want to go to the USA or Canada”, while Yankin in Russia points to the UK and USA primarily, as well as “sometimes Australia, France and Germany”. Bichri in Finland says that while the UK is his main market, Ireland and the USA are becoming more popular.

It would seem then, that schools have everything to play for, with a large potential client base. Many believe that overall demand will also rise in the future. Gallegos in the USA forecasts “continued growth [in bookings] as more international companies adopt English as their internal ‘official’ language”, and Bowen pinpoints China as a market to watch. The main demand for specialist training programmes will be felt in English teaching countries, but Lewis in the USA forewarns that demand will grow around the globe. “I believe that the demand for this market will increase as more people find themselves with limited time to accomplish numerous goals,” she says.

According to Bichri, the clientele is ready and waiting. “The main question is if there will be selected professional training centres specialised [enough] in this field and in this fast global market,” he says. Flora Bender of Wind Internacional in Brazil argues that there is already a gap between client demand and specialist supply. “There is still a lack of good programmes with more start dates for programmes in the areas of law and medicine,” she says.

Gomez in Mexico suggests that there is a problem of course infrastructure development for Spanish language tuition. “There is not enough technology in the market for Spanish speciality courses,” she says. Promoting such programmes does require substantial investment, as Wilkinson at BBSI acknowledges. “Specialised training requires significant investment of infrastructure within the school in terms of materials, development, hardware, presentation and, of course, substantial additional marketing costs.”

Rodrigues adds that courses are now expected to be shorter, more intensive, and in a competitively priced package, with highly specific content, frequent start dates and guaranteed late availability on courses.

Clearly, there are challenges ahead for the sector. Specialised and innovative input is a key factor for success. Horner says that at his school, a new product has been introduced aimed at the 18-to-25 year old age group which is entering the job market for the first time. “We focus on language required for entry into the business environment, such as recruitment and interview techniques,” he explains.

At AIS St Helens, students are offered additional incentives. For example, successful graduates of its teacher training programme are guaranteed a job interview with the school, and, if they are a degree holder, a job interview with Nova, one of Japan’s largest English schools. □