

Date: Apr 1, 2016; Section: EL ASSOCIATIONS; Page: 9

Domesticating the student market

The IALC report shows how language travel specialists need to keep an eye on trends in their students' domestic markets, says Melanie Butler

'The language travel segment (language training abroad) exists within the larger environment for foreign languages. More specifically, the annual number of students learning a foreign language abroad represents less than 0.25 per cent of all second language learners.'

This statement will come as no surprise to the hundreds of regular readers of the Gazette involved in what the report refers to as 'domestic' language learning – learning which takes place where students actually live. Of course, most people studying foreign languages are children in school, but the numbers in specialist language schools are simply staggering. According to the Financial Times, 0.6 per cent of the gross domestic product of South Korea is spent on private English language tuition.

There may be some 1,900 private language schools dealing with language travellers in the English-speaking world, as the IALC report asserts, and there are more than 2,000 in Beijing. And despite English UK's oft-made claim to be the biggest language teaching association in the world, it has fewer members than Fecei, the language schools association of Spain. Yet English UK represents well over 50 per cent of all the language schools in the UK, while only around 10 per cent of Spanish language schools belong to Fecei.

Traditionally language travel schools have seen domestic language schools as competition. The Gazette has always seen this view as odd – after all, nobody thinks a trend for children taking private tennis lessons is bad news for those offering tennis holidays. In many countries middle-class children attend local language schools for four hours a week – they can't jump on a plane and fly to Dublin to do that. But children who study at home are much more likely to travel abroad to learn a language and to go to a private language school if they do so.

The agents interviewed by StudentMarketing for the IALC report agree with the Gazette

– they see growth in demand for private language education as presaging a growth in language travel for that language. 'Domestic demand levels for particular language learning form a foundation for the need and demand for language training abroad,' as the report puts it.

Hence the report looked specifically at the growth in demand for domestic private language schools, 'as it is especially language training in private language courses that encourages, or indicates, more demand for learning the language abroad'. The good news is that agents reported a growth in demand for domestic language courses in all languages except Portuguese and Russian. Growth in demand was highest for English, reported by 84 per cent of all agents, but significant rises were also seen for German (49 per cent), Chinese (41 per cent) and Spanish (39 per cent).

The demand for learning languages other than English was highest in Europe and Latin America, consistently the best performers in international English language exams. This suggests that providers of German, French and Chinese courses should look to these markets for growth. As for domestic language schools, perhaps they should consider hiring a couple of teachers of languages other than English, especially for the adult market. After all, according to the agents who responded to the StudentMarketing survey, 20 per cent of all language travellers are going abroad to learn their second language. The future is multilingual.