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Tips on top travel trends

Melanie Butler dives deep into the data on studying abroad in the brand new Ialc report on trends in demand for language learning

Every year, 2.8 million people across the world travel abroad to learn a language, but that makes up just 0.25 per cent of the world's language learners. These astounding figures appear in 'Trends in Demand for Language Learning', a report produced for the International Association of Language Centres (Ialc) by StudentMarketing.

The report, which aims to document the trends in the market as well as its size, is based on a comparative analysis of nine major foreign languages – Chinese, English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish. Student-Marketing based its findings on an analysis of 60 separate secondary sources together with a survey of 466 language travel agents in 74 countries who, combined, are responsible for sending 236,000 students abroad to learn a language – 8.6 per cent of the total language travel market.

English remains the big beast in the room, making up 61 per cent of language travel and showing the highest increase in demand in 2015, as reported by the agents surveyed. It also boasts the highest number of private language schools, the longest stays, the highest reliance on agents and the highest commission rates – 23 per cent as opposed to 21 per cent in the market overall.

But English doesn't have it all its own way. Just 10 per cent of students report learning English for pleasure, according to the agents' survey, compared to 60 per cent for Italian and Portuguese and around 45 per cent for Spanish. Nor was employment the main reason for learning English, as it was for Russian and Chinese. In many source markets knowledge of English is simply a basic skill which employers expect.

For English, as for German, the biggest reason given was 'further studies'. This emphasises not only the key role language learning plays in the education travel market but also the growing importance of Germany, particularly in the market for overseas degree courses.

The changing reasons for learning a language are reflected in the most popular types of courses. For all tongues other than English, this remains general language, but in the lead market this has shifted to exam preparation – perhaps for getting into further studies – followed by language camps for juniors. This is reflected in the increasing percentage of the market for English made up of under-18s, which account for nearly half of all learners going to the UK, Ireland and Malta. The authors note that the English required by language travellers is becoming more specialised and bespoke, with agents reporting an increasing interest in one-to-one courses.

The authors argue that, with English being introduced in school curricula around the world at ever earlier ages – English-language nurseries are predicted by many to be the next big thing – the average level of competence is increasing. While demand for English is still high in Asia, as well as in the Middle East and North Africa at 86 per cent and 87 per cent of all language travel respectively, it is lower in the traditional markets of Europe (74 per cent) and Latin America (77 per cent).

These are the markets leading the charge into the second foreign language market, particularly for other European languages. Ten per cent of Latin Americans are choosing to learn French, and 5 per cent are choosing German. Interestingly the survey also shows that Spanish courses make up 4 per cent of this market, presumably mostly from Brazil. Europeans are choosing to learn German, now 8 per cent of the market, followed by French and Spanish, both at 6 per cent. This trend is likely to increase if Britain leaves the EU, which would threaten the role of English as one of the working language of the EU Commission and the European Parliament.

Perhaps the most startling figure in this report, however, is that one in five of all language travellers are now learning a second foreign language. This growing demand is also emphasised by the fact that agents offering languages other than English show better financial results, with none reporting a fall in enrolments in 2015. The growing importance of multilingualism is one of the key findings of this ground-breaking report, with all agents who took part in in-depth interviews highlighting 'the multilingual attributes of students in their countries'.



GOING PLACES 18–24-year-olds are still the biggest market segment, according to the IALC report

Courtesy University of the Fraser Valley