

Diversity and change in adult language learning

- The number of adults learning languages in local authority and FE college classes is continuing to decline.
- Spanish continues to grow as the foremost language learnt, with Italian, British Sign Language and Arabic also increasing their share of the market.
- Between 11% and 12% of local authorities and FE colleges are already using Asset Languages to accredit learning.

These are the initial findings from CILT's survey of adult language learning, carried out in conjunction with NIACE and the Association for Language Learning earlier this year. Although figures on learner numbers are difficult to interpret, the findings reflect similar conclusions published by NIACE last month (Figures of Speech, May 2007). In addition to the overall decline, these highlight the growing diversity of adult language learning provision, and the growth in participation from ethnic minority communities.

The traditional languages evening class appears to have been hit hard by funding constraints, with both local authorities and FE colleges reporting a steady increase in the fees charged. Minimum average charges in local authorities have gone up from 90p per hour in 2004-05 to £1.75 per hour in the current academic year, and in FE Colleges the maximum hourly fee is now £16.00 as opposed to £7.50 two years ago.

However, there is no doubt that demand for language learning remains strong, with providers like the Goethe Institut reporting increasing interest in their courses. People are learning languages in ever more diverse and innovative ways. Amongst the applications for this year's European Awards for Languages, Gateshead Local Authority has just introduced an 'Eat and Speak Greek' course targeting adults who love Greece and want to be able to speak to the locals on holiday as well as cook Greek dishes. North Yorkshire Council works with partners in France, Spain and Germany to give adults the opportunity to learn in tandem with counterparts overseas and to develop friendships through e-learning and exchanges. In the East End of Glasgow, a community association runs a popular scheme which teaches Spanish to cross-generational family groups from toddlers to grandparents.

The Specialist Colleges movement is active too: at Fairfax School in the West Midlands, Sixth Formers are passing on their prowess in French to local Senior Citizens. New technology is playing a big role in making language learning available when and where it suits learners. A new scheme launched from South Ayrshire last year offers weekly Spanish podcasts. It has already developed a vibrant community of learners and consistently appears in the top three educational podcasts across the UK, USA and Canada. But perhaps the most innovative idea amongst those submitted for a European Award was an initiative to supply holiday-makers with a personal language assistant to help them with targeted language practice whilst in the country. The scheme hopes for example to provide assistance with basic Bulgarian for British families visiting the country.

CILT will keep a close eye on these and other initiatives and report on progress in due course. A full report on the survey of local authorities and FE colleges will be published later in 2007.