

OPEN LEARNING

The Lingua Spanish Programme for Edinburgh Employers

SPANISH IN SCOTLAND

The Business Challenge



Millions of people visit Edinburgh each year, spending around £250 million annually and providing employment for some 12,000 people. However, little has been done in the past to influence the type and pattern of tourism in order to maximise its benefits to the city.

A survey carried out in 1989 set out to identify ways of enhancing Edinburgh's position within the UK tourist industry. A key objective that emerged was to improve foreign language proficiency among tourist operators in order to enhance the quality of service offered to visitors from abroad.

Over the past ten years there has been a noticeable increase in Spanish visitors to the city. In 1990 Edinburgh received 26,239 Spanish guests who spent a total of 130,367 nights and contributed almost £5 million in revenue. The Greenside Hotel in Edinburgh, typical of many, has experienced a 30 per cent increase in overseas visitors.

Recognising the importance of this growing sector and the fact that, compared with other Europeans, Spanish tourists are often less proficient in English, Edinburgh Marketing, the Tourist Board and the Convention Bureau for Scotland's Capital (representing 800 companies in the city), decided to help their members to achieve a practical level of Spanish quickly and cost-effectively.

The problem lay in finding a workable solution; the tourist industry is widely dispersed and operational pressures make it difficult for staff to take time off work to study.

It was decided that the solution lay in an Open Learning initiative. Edinburgh Marketing believed that a flexible training package would be ideally suited to the needs of the tourist sector and that the Spanish version might also be adapted for other European languages.



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LEARNING METHODS CASE STUDY



Participating Companies

Edinburgh's Butterfly World is typical of 14 tourism employers in the city who decided to respond to the needs of their Spanish visitors. Other companies included Edinburgh Castle and the Scotch Whisky Heritage Centre, as well as numerous hotels and guest-houses.

Butterfly World is located on the outskirts of the city and displays tropical butterflies and other insects. It has approximately 90,000 visitors each year and an annual turnover of £0.25 million. At present just over 20 per cent of the Centre's visitors are from overseas, largely from mainland Europe.

The manager of Butterfly World believed that proficiency in Spanish would be of immediate benefit to the Centre as it would facilitate negotiations with suppliers, many of whom were based in South America. In more general terms, it would also enable the Centre to improve customer service.

Other participants in the initiative concurred with the view of Edinburgh Marketing that a higher level of customer care would have a direct impact on future levels of tourism in the city by increasing visitor recommendations.

The Training Solution

The Open Learning package had to meet two primary objectives:

- relevance to staff from a wide range of tourism sectors
- adaptability into other European languages at a future date.

The training materials were developed in partnership with the International Unit at Lothian Regional Department of Education and designed by a member of the Languages Department at Edinburgh's Stevenson College. The aim was to create a pilot scheme which would enable the new material to be evaluated before more widespread use.

O P E N L E A R N I N G

Funding was provided under the EC's Lingua programme for the development of self-study materials. The long-term objective was that the materials would be adapted for use and accreditation in other EC states, such as Denmark and Spain, countries with which the Lothian region already had strong ties.

Designing the Training Materials

Edinburgh Marketing and Stevenson College liaised closely with the 14 participating companies and identified key areas to be covered. There were three main design considerations to be met:

- Basic Open Learning materials were to be written initially in English for English-speaking employees working in the hotel, catering and tourism sectors. The main objective was to create a competence in spoken Spanish which would meet the requirements of Scotvec Levels 1 and 2.
- Materials had to be written so that they could be adapted for use by Danish speakers learning Spanish and by Spanish speakers learning English.
- Materials had to incorporate regular assessment modules to facilitate accreditation to established standards.

For the purposes of Scotvec Level 2, students needed to be able to:

- exchange personal information with speakers of the target language
- obtain and provide goods and services
- converse on matters of mutual interest

- negotiate services
- listen and read for information and/or pleasure
- understand simple, written text and write simple letters/messages in the target language.

The package comprised ten units, each supported by an audio-cassette of dialogues and transcripts. Each unit was designed to involve up to two hours of study time. The course required students to listen to Spanish spoken at normal speed and to become familiar with several regional accents.

Student Support

Although the emphasis of the materials was on self-study, a key feature was the support given to trainees, both by the programme tutor and by other members of the employee group. Each trainee was paired with a colleague and the materials also ensured that there were regular opportunities for group work. On-site tutorials were held every two weeks. Additional support was provided by a telephone helpline enabling trainees to consult the tutor with queries or questions and by access to Stevenson College's Open Learning Centre.

Initial Feedback

Although trainees experienced some initial difficulties in coping with the speed of spoken Spanish and with the regional accents, most began to gain confidence once the first unit had been completed. Tutors emphasised the

importance of capitalising on the first introductory session and of encouraging students to speak the language as early as possible.

Project Results

The key outcome of the Open Learning programme has been the increased confidence of staff in communicating effectively with Spanish-speaking tourists. The success of the scheme has been such that non-participating employees have expressed an interest in being included in future projects. The satisfaction of gaining a recognised qualification on which students could build was also an important incentive.

Participating companies were unanimous in reporting real business benefits. At Butterfly World, for example, improved communication with tourists is already leading to an upturn in visitors, expected to increase by four per cent by 1993.

At the Scotch Whisky Heritage Centre, the marketing manager has also seen a significant increase in the number of Spanish visitors. The Cameron Toll guest-house in the centre of Edinburgh easily achieved its aim of being able to welcome Spanish visitors in their native language. Already 50 per cent of the hotel's staff have some basic language competence and overseas visitor numbers are expected to increase by ten per cent in 1993.

Each of the participants therefore saw significant benefits in terms of staff confidence and motivation and in numbers of overseas visitors. For all, Open Learning has proved an ideal solution for an industry in which employees can be scattered over several remote locations.

Future Development

Each of the trainees involved in the Open Learning programme is to have the opportunity of a work placement in Barcelona upon completion of the course. Spanish trainees will likewise be invited to work in Scotland. The prospect of working abroad has proved a valuable incentive.

The original training package is to be further developed using Computer-Based Training (CBT) materials at Stevenson College's Open Learning Centre. There are also plans to prepare a more advanced follow-up course which will take students to Scotvec Level 3.

Already, the training materials have been adapted for use in Denmark and Spain. Ultimately, the cultivation of these international learning partnerships will lead to the development of tele-conferencing facilities and interactive video techniques to support the future progress of the programme; a hi-tech future for a highly successful training initiative.

This Case Study is one of a series of eight covering Open Learning and foreign languages in the hospitality and leisure sector.