

## The language of love (01/09/2008)

*French couple Christian and Dominique Chasset set up the Hong Kong Institute of Languages in 1985, teaching French to executives. The business has flourished: it has grown to occupy much larger premises, boasts a team of tutors, and teaches a range of languages to children and adults. After more than 20 years, Dominique explains why "the biggest decision" of their lives was also the best decision.*



Christian and Dominique Chasset at their Hong Kong Institute of Languages, the school they set up 23 years ago

"Christian and I were tourists in Hong Kong when we met. We liked it and decided to stay. We married, and, as we were both teachers, it seemed natural to set up language classes.

With a very limited budget, we started the institute in a single room in Admiralty. That's the good thing about Hong Kong: anyone can start a company with just a few dollars. It was the biggest decision of our lives, but we loved the climate and the vibrancy of the city. We also saw an opportunity. There were no private language schools – only the British Council, Alliance Française and Goethe Institute – and no one was teaching languages to children. One's reputation was not built around fancy advertising then but from actual success, spread by word of mouth. Quality was the key.

Our business model was, and is, to teach small-group classes, mostly a maximum of six students. Emphasis is on interaction and oral practice of the language in the class – thus the small number of students in the class, while all our competitors had 25-plus. We focus on practical language that can be used right away: students always leave the class having learnt something new that they can use. For children, it's fun, with acquisition of the language being achieved through hands-on activities: games, songs, etc, in the same way that they acquired their mother language. Another of our unique points is that we use native teachers with real qualifications, which means holding a degree in teaching their language to foreigners, as opposed to just being a native speaker.

### Changing lives

It took time for us to convince Hong Kong people that this worked. Originally, all they wanted was written work and grammar. We managed to convince them that learning to speak the language and being able to communicate was much more important. Since then our model has been copied by hundreds of language schools. Results are what made our model successful: we really made a change in our students' lives.

Today we teach seven languages: English, French, German, Spanish, Mandarin, Cantonese and Japanese. We occupy three floors or about 6,000 sq ft in Central, we have about 35 tutors, and about 800 to 1,000 students take lessons from us each week. We were also the first language school to organise overseas summer camps, which we view as an extension of our teaching.

Hong Kong is still a very liberal place, with low taxes and simple accounting. But we do wish the government would regulate the business more to protect the public and legitimate course providers. Unfortunately, some competitors take advantage of the simple legislation to abuse the system by using "teachers" who are not properly qualified, or by registering their school in an inappropriate location.

If there's one thing I could change, it would be getting people to realise they cannot become fluent speakers with just a few lessons. To learn a language, one needs time and effort. It is like learning to play the piano: it takes a while to really become proficient. Once you have accepted that, you are on the right track.

For adults, the greatest demand is for English and Mandarin. English is necessary to survive in the business environment, and Mandarin is necessary to do business with China. For children, it is English, French, Mandarin and Spanish. After several years of growing demand for Mandarin, with the development of the International Baccalaureate diploma, the emphasis seems to be going back to European languages.

### **Hong Kong is home**

Christian and I really love Hong Kong and China, and we could not picture ourselves living anywhere else. Of course, like a lot of people, we are very concerned by the pollution, which did not exist back in 1985. But Hong Kong is still a thrilling and dynamic place. Things are changing, and the key is to keep up with these changes and adapt.

We love the beauty and diversity of the place. In Hong Kong you can live by the sea, as we do in Discovery Bay, and be in the middle of the business district in Central in about half an hour. On weekends, you can choose to hike in Lantau or go shopping in busy Causeway Bay. We also love the Chinese culture, Chinese food, China's emergence, the Olympics – we've just come back from Beijing, where we were able to practice our Mandarin with a group of students – and how everything can be done simply and quickly.

And more important, we love what we do: we feel great accomplishment in seeing how many students we have helped over the years.

### **Related link**

[Hong Kong Institute of Languages](#)