

During a Saturday morning language arts lesson at the Hong Kong Institute of Languages, teacher Emmanuelle Guyon was keeping a close eye on all her students.

"That is a beautiful picture Michael," she said encouragingly in French to one of the boys as he flicked through the crayon box looking for just the right colour to finish his masterpiece. "Can you tell us what it is about?"

Sitting across the table an arm's length away from the students, Ms Guyon could carefully monitor her students' individual progress simply because she only had four children to teach. After a little coaxing, the shy 7-year-old began to glow with pride as he started to describe his picture in French, pausing only occasionally to ask a word in English -- his second language after Cantonese.



Photo Gallery Here

"This is a much easier way for students to be immersed in a language and to even enjoy studying," the center's Director, Christian Chasset, explained. "If you give children a book and try to teach them through drills, they just switch off, so you have to keep them engaged, otherwise you don't get very far."

In another room, some children were pretending to be shopkeepers, while others were putting on a puppet show musical. "We do a lot of role play, which in effect puts children in real-life situations. This method is very effective, not to mention fun, and is also a technique that we use for adult language classes," he added.

Tried and tested formula

Smaller class sizes have been proven in studies to increase a student's learning potential and allow for students to progress at a personalized pace to fit their needs. This method forms the foundations on which the institute has built its success over the past 20 years.

In 1985, Mr Chasset and his wife Dominique, took two of the biggest decisions of their lives, for this was the year that they married and opened the Hong Kong Institute of Languages. At the time, most language schools in Hong Kong packed as many students into a class as possible. Mr & Mrs Chasset, who are both teachers from the school of small class sizes, saw an opportunity to introduce their style of language teaching to the territory. With a very limited budget, they rented out a small room in Admiralty and started teaching French to small groups of executives.

"We started out on a very small scale," Mr Chasset, who used to teach French back in his homeland, explained. "That is the good thing about Hong Kong. Anyone can start a company with just a few dollars."

Two years later, they had built up a steady flow of corporate clients and had saved enough to open a new branch in Causeway Bay. The business continued to grow, and in 1990 they expanded to their current

premises where they occupy three floors in Central -- one floor for adult language classes, one for children and one for administration.

English, French and Mandarin language training are the most sought after courses in Hong Kong and the mix hasn't changed much over the past two decades, Mr Chasset explained. For corporate classes, which account for about a third of the company's business, English is still the most popular language. The challenge of finding enough qualified teachers, however, is becoming increasingly difficult.

"We have to advertise for teachers overseas, because we need qualified, native speakers," he said. "It used to be quite difficult to apply for a work permit for these teachers, but things are much better now, because we have been around for many years the Immigration Department now understands our needs."

By far the biggest challenge that the couple have had to overcome running their school was SARS. For three months, despite virtually zero income, they still had to pay wages and rent. The government's SARS relief package didn't include language schools, so the couple were forced to dig deep into their personal savings to keep the business afloat. Their sheer determination, and an understanding landlord, managed to see them through their darkest days. "Those really were tough times," Mr Chasset said, shaking his head.

Broadening the language base

A common gripe among businesses in recent years is that the language proficiency of Hong Kong's workforce is declining. Mr Chasset agrees that the standard of English has deteriorated in recent years, but he points out that at the same time more people can speak at least some basic English and Mandarin.

"If you took a taxi 20 years ago, you almost always had to speak into the cab radio to a dispatcher because the driver could not understand you. Now, you seldom have a problem making yourself understood, so in that regard things have improved a lot," he said.

With more Hongkongers putting in the extra effort to learn a new language or improve their existing language abilities, he hopes that many of them will continue their studies to raise their hard-earned skills to the next level.

"The government's Workplace English Campaign and Continuing Education Fund is making it more affordable than ever for people to upgrade their skills, so this is a positive move by the administration," he said.

In hectic Hong Kong, however, time -- or lack of it -- tends to be the biggest obstacle to improving language proficiency. But not for Michael: "This is me and my mother and father on holiday in Paris during Chinese New Year. And this is me buying some French cakes in the bakery," he explains. "I am speaking French because I have been studying hard every Saturday, and when we come back I'm going to study even harder because I like learning French."

Company: Hong Kong Institute of Languages

Established: 1985

Business: Language instruction

Year joined HKGCC: 2000

Web site: www.hklanguages.com