

British Airways flies the flag for languages



British Airways carries around 33 million customers a year to some 140 destinations around the world. 49% of customers are not from a British background. This is why the airline needs people to serve its customers who can speak a range of languages and have an understanding of different cultures.

Our Business Language Champions programme in London aims to highlight existing activities between businesses and schools, and with their British Airways Language Flag Award the airline has set a great example. The Award is designed to promote the learning of languages, and was launched in 1999 as part of the company's Community Investment Programme. It encourages school students to develop the skills required to work not just for an international airline but in any multilingual, multicultural workplace. Initially rolled out to schools near Gatwick and Heathrow airports, it is now available nationwide.

Offered in 18 languages

The test lasts 15-20 minutes and involves a conversation, reading aloud, roleplay as well as listening and interpreting. It mirrors the Flag Test developed for British Airways' frontline staff and assesses spoken language ability in situations which in most instances are



outside the airline and airport environment – for example, a hotel reception desk, the post office or a café. Students taking the Flag Award are always put in the employee's role, and not given scenarios beforehand to make sure the interaction is natural and spontaneous.

The Award is currently offered in 18 languages, including English and a wide range of Community Languages, recognising the number of students in London and other parts of the UK for whom English is not the home language. Polish, an increasingly significant language among young people in London, is being introduced from September 2008.

Grace Dawson at Dormers Well High School in Southall has been

involved in the programme since 2004. The school is exceptionally diverse, with students from Afghan, Indian, Pakistani, Tamil and Somali backgrounds among others. Grace is herself accredited to test French and Spanish, while BA assessors come into the school to test Somali students in their home language. There is a strong fit with the GCSE languages curriculum, and the school has even replaced the Year 10 examination with the Flag Award. French students were also lucky enough to visit Heathrow's Waterside headquarters, where they got to perform roleplays in a simulated aircraft, dressing up in full cabin crew uniform.

Grace, the school's Head of Language Development, said, "My students really enjoy the Award and the way it brings the workplace to life. It's great to see the sense of pride and achievement they feel when they receive their badge and certificate."

Building the programme in London

Christèle Claveau, Language College Director at Slough Grammar School, has found her students similarly motivated. They started the link with BA in 2002, and every student is entered for at least one language of French, German or Spanish, with Chinese planned for the future.



150 students take the award each year, and the school has a strong relationship with BA – even teaching Spanish, Italian and Chinese to airline staff. "Our students take the Award very seriously. It gives them an extra push towards taking languages at A Level."

Project Manager Kath Curry is aiming to build the programme further still in London with the 2012 Games and recent expansion of City Airport as incentives. "We're delighted with the growth in take-up and look forward to welcoming more London schools on board." To July 2007, Flag Award passes numbered nearly 7,000, with hundreds of schools and teachers involved since its launch.

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