

# Case study

Languages and culture at work

## Tailored Spanish language training is just the ticket for London's bus station controllers

Keeping London's buses running smoothly around the clock is challenging work. A team of 260 staff – located in both bus stations and mobile units – have this responsibility, and need to communicate effectively with suppliers, public services and customers every day of the year. In recent months, bus station controllers working in frontline roles noticed overseas tourist numbers on the increase, in particular for Spanish speakers. Realising customer service could be boosted by even a few words in the passenger's language, Operational Training Manager Keith Crabb took steps to set up a language training pilot.



### A course tailored to their specific business needs

"We contacted Cactus Language Training, who were located close to the bus station in Victoria, and talked about tailoring a course to our specific business needs – we didn't want to end up just with holiday phrases", said Keith. "In the end, their language tutors came down to the station to shadow controllers for half a day – what better way of learning about our day-to-day interaction with customers?"

The pilot, which trained staff in Spanish initially, included two sessions a week, each lasting two hours and timed flexibly to allow team members on different shifts to participate. The opportunity was only offered to those who expressed an interest, ensuring trainees had enthusiasm for the programme. Language learning and roleplays focused on key aspects of the job, such as giving directions, fares and issuing tickets.

### Language skills can remove confusion and save time and money

Eight members of the team completed the 15 weeks of training between April and August 2008, and the language knowledge they took away appears to have made a big impact in terms not only of customer service at the station, but also in the skills they get to use in their social lives. Working alongside colleagues who speak languages such as Greek and Polish as their mother tongue, controllers at the bus station are now beginning to offer a genuinely multilingual welcome not only to overseas visitors but to London's multicultural residents.

Keith and his Assistant Manager Ethel Allison are now looking beyond the pilot to see whether a wider language training programme should be rolled out to cover other languages in demand such as French, German and Chinese Cantonese and Mandarin. As a speaker of basic French and Portuguese himself, Keith understands the value of languages. "With the 2012 Games on the horizon, we want to be able to assist customers wherever in the world they come from. Language skills can remove confusion, save time and money, and put a smile on the customer's face."



## Links

**London Buses** [www.tfl.gov.uk/buses](http://www.tfl.gov.uk/buses)

**Cactus Language Training** [www.cactuslanguagetraining.com](http://www.cactuslanguagetraining.com)

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