

FINANCIAL POST

Saturday, January 16, 2010

China learns the Lingo

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MIKE CLARKE/AFP/Getty Images

The world's lingua franca is English and an estimated two billion are trying to learn it as their passport to business success and global access. China leads the pack, followed by India and Eastern Europe.

"This year China will become the world's largest English-speaking nation of more than 300 million," said Mike Kraft, CEO of Lingo Media Corp., which is poised to cash in on this gigantic market.

But English-speaking is a bit of a misnomer. The problem in China is a shortage of teachers who speak English properly. Enter Lingo Media, Kraft's small, Toronto-listed company. He has been a specialty publisher for years, developing English textbook products for China's governments. Then he realized the teacher shortage problem so he just launched a breakthrough Web-based learning product using voice-recognition software for the Chinese market.

Within a year of operation, it has signed up one million registered users and is growing its client base exponentially. The site, speak2me.cn, is in Chinese and accessible on the Web. Free to registrants, it provides a virtual teacher, an avatar, who interacts with students. This avatar speaks English properly and, through voice-recognition software, "listens" to students repeat her words and sentences, then makes them verbalize over again until they get it right. There is scoring and there are contests and prizes.

Students can tap into hundreds of tailor-made modules -- about shopping, studying, working, travelling or socializing -- that help them practise their pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar.

They can repeat them as often as they wish and the site is friendly and playful. It makes practice enjoyable instead of painful.

"The Chinese are so proficient at passing tests by memorizing, reading, writing but the teachers cannot speak it properly," Kraft said.

"We are giving them a personal English teacher, without cost, on their PCs."

Speak2me is free to registrants because its business model is based on advertising. Messages are embedded into content without affecting its quality. Because speak2me is so far ahead of language instruction rivals in the giant Chinese market, it has been approached and has signed up some of the world's biggest advertisers, such as Mercedes-Benz, Motorola and others.

"Within three months, 60,000 Chinese professionals did English lessons on our site, which included Smart Car content and promotion," Kraft said.

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