

Breaking Barriers

Helping newcomers improve their English is what **James Herbertson** does best. The founder of language learning network **Answer English** spoke to **Anna Maria Espsater** about his passion for helping new arrivals feel at home.

Growing up on the outskirts of London, James Herbertson developed a love for the city very early on, but the real inspiration behind his company *Answer English*, and learning languages in general, stems from the four months he spent in Spain when he was 19.

"I had the best time of my life, a brilliant experience," he enthuses, "and I made many international friends who shared an interest in learning languages."

Although James was taught French at school, language wasn't one of his favourite subjects. Spending time in Spain soon changed that. Within weeks of being in a different country, he realised what a life-enhancing experience learning a language can be.



Still, the road to a career in languages, and starting his own business, was varied and winding. After Spain, he studied Economics at Leeds University and after finishing his degree, worked for a number of years in the media, for The Sun newspaper, at first in London, and later at their offices on the Costa del Sol and Madrid.

Failing to become the paper's page 7 fella was a disappointment, but improving his Spanish made up for it. Not long after, he decided - close to a decade after his initial stay in Spain - that it was time to take the plunge and set up his new venture.

The aim? To provide foreign students arriving in the UK with the same excellent experience he'd been fortunate to have in his late teens.

"Once I'd decided to combine my love for London with my love for languages, abandoning Madrid to launch Answer English was easy," he says, before admitting that things were hard at first. "As with most new businesses, things were difficult to start with. I knew very little about the industry, and we'd sit in the office twiddling our thumbs, or working on our website, waiting for the first students to contact us, but now a year and a half down the line, we're looking forward to a busy summer."

James credits his company's success to its unique approach. Although there are hundreds of language learning companies based in students' countries of origin, very few are UK based, and even fewer focus on the full works.

"We help with everything from finding schools and accommodation, to the nitty-gritty of visa applications and opening bank accounts, as well as the more fun aspects like social events and language evenings," he says. "We specialise in making newcomers' lives easier in an interesting and fun way. It's as simple as that."

Answer English branched out recently. They now offer walking tours for language students in London and sight-seeing trips with a language learning emphasis, to places such as Bath.

A people's person, James thrives on social interaction with his students, and finds the outings a good way to discover more about his home town.

"Sometimes you need the spark of newcomers to discover what's already on your doorstep," he says.

James' varied experience in the media - he continues to write a column called *London Life* for a language learning magazine - coupled with a degree in Economics, have come in handy with the

day-to-day running of his business, particularly with sales and marketing.

And the marketing is paying off. Originally covering Spain and Latin America, *Answer English* now takes students from all corners of the globe. The company employs people on a full and part-time basis from their office near Marylebone, and James's mother helps out as company secretary, so the atmosphere in the office is one of real team spirit.

Social events have become an important part of the *Answer English* calendar, and after a Spanish language evening in central London, the events proved so popular that French and Italian evenings were soon added. The company now employs someone to organise events and social get-togethers.

With such a simple concept, bringing together native speakers of English and Spanish, French or Italian, on different nights and getting them communicating with each other, it's easy to think this happens naturally in everyday life. James shakes his head.

"It's not as easy as it seems," he says. "It can be surprisingly difficult for language students in the UK to meet native English speakers, and many English speakers studying foreign languages face similar problems when practising their new skills abroad.

"So bringing together groups of language learners is very rewarding. Meeting people with similar interests in London can be a challenge even for local Londoners but one of the great things about our company is that we introduce newcomers to those in similar circumstances, which gives them an extra opportunity to practise their language skills."

Apart from the ever popular Spanish, French and Italian nights that *Answer English* hold once a month, they also do Chinese nights, a Latin party night and, most recently, walking tours of London, which are attended by language teachers as well as students."

"We also operate an internet community with over 500 members, which has an emphasis on language learning. Plus we send out a free monthly English lesson by email, and there's the *Answer English* football team!

Clearly James and his team are working hard to put the fun back into learning English, helping students to discover their adopted city and its people along the way.

"Yes it's been hard, setting up a business is always a challenge, but I'm very positive and happy with the experience so far, and with the speed in which we've developed since our launch," says James. "Watching students improve their English, gain confidence and create a new life for themselves is so rewarding to watch.

"Of course, there are downsides. The long hours now that we're expanding means that I don't get to spend as much one-to-one time with students personally, not as much as I used to anyway," he says wistfully.

Still, the recent expansion means more opportunities to explore new ideas and try out new things and James is full of enthusiasm about what lies ahead.

"With more students arriving in the summer there will be more exciting events, and possibly a summer school."

James is positively brimming with excitement, so when I ask if starting a business is something he'd recommend, I already suspect the answer.

He nods enthusiastically. "Most definitely! Lots of people say they'd like to start their own business, and have great ideas, but never take the leap. You need to develop a 'can-do' attitude and look at things differently, as well as research the downsides before starting out, but it's a myth that it's really hard to start your own business.

"There's nothing to stop you," he says with convincing confidence. "If you have the idea, the will and the skill, then really, there truly is nothing to stop you."

For further information about *Answer English* and their range of language services visit:
www.answerenglish.co.uk.

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