



LEARNING CURVE: Toniks provides pupils with foreign language lessons, monitored by a class teacher

UK couple worldwide

A COUPLE'S inventive use of internet technology has enabled them to set up a global online language school with minimal investment and low running costs.

Toniks, the brainchild of entrepreneurs Karen Hollands and her husband, Mike, offers language classes using free video-calling technology available from internet telephone specialist Skype.

From their bases around the world, Toniks-qualified, native-speaking teachers conduct pre-arranged lessons with their students in virtual classrooms in real time where they can see and interact with each other.

The 60-minute sessions are recorded so students can replay the lesson afterwards if they wish.

Recruitment, teacher training, course instruction, payments and lesson-material transfers are all carried out online.

So far the business has 30 tutors in 13 countries. The most popular languages are Spanish, Russian and Mandarin Chinese — reflecting international commercial growth patterns — with clients coming mostly from the UK, US and

Free calls via
have allowed
of modestly
lessons, says

mainland Europe. "But with our teaching and business models it does not always matter who lives where," explains Karen, 42.

"Flexibility and simplicity are the essentials of our operation, but because our team are native speakers they have a profound knowledge of the culture as well as the language they are teaching."

A £100,000 turnover is expected this year, with growth continuing at 20 per cent.

Toniks' co-founders have combined their experiences and skills to

teachers a classroom

the internet

the setting up

priced global

Maisha Frost

maximum effect. Mike, 45, whose background is in international telecoms, oversees the technical side while Karen, who studied law, has worked for corporates which gave her a good insight into what globe-trotting executives would want from a language course.

The Hohndages first came up with the enterprise when running their own language school in North-east Brazil where they employed teachers and ran courses for adults and children.

"That taught us what is required to run such a business," says Karen.

"It made us look at how to reduce the costs, easier ways to recruit staff and work out what would make it feasible for us to build our own global business from home, our ultimate goal.

"The benefits opened up by the internet were obvious but we had to wait until the tech-no-logy, particularly broadband, matured and established and the tools, such as web-conferencing, were in place and their standards sufficiently high so they were proven to work smoothly.

"The biggest challenge from then on has been convincing our clients the technology is stable enough to be viable.

By 2000, the couple, who have two children, were back in the UK in Weybridge, Surrey, and the time, they judged, had arrived. They launched Tonks with £15,000 from their own savings and invested most of it in the website which was built and is now

hosted by Devon-based Createmnet. Cashflow is not a problem because clients pay in advance, usually through Paypal, with lessons costing £25 each for a course of 20.

Tutors are paid the same hourly rate regardless of where they live, and save by being able to work from home.

"This has removed wage imbalances and helped with recruiting because they have no travel overheads," says Karen.

A strategy based on cost-efficiency and low charges has always been central to Tonks.

"Yet we could never have foreseen how critical that would become, given the times we are trading in now with the impact of the credit crunch," adds Karen.

But Tonks would not exist without the technological and social changes introduced by internet services and Skype, she points out.

"Without Skype, the costs would be prohibitive for a small business like this, it is integral to what we are doing — 100 per cent of our tuition is delivered this way.

"The consequent savings have been put to good use because we have invested them in the tuition, ensuring the best quality."

The business has launched its first school contract and there are potentially far bigger opportunities.

Tonks now delivers extra-curricular tuition in Italian, Mandarin, Russian and German to young pupils at a prep school, Pelton Fleet in nearby Cobham.

"All our tutors are properly vetted, a Pelton teacher sits in the sessions and we deliver it to groups of four," says Karen.

"It has gone very well. Our courses are fun and relevant and the children really enjoy learning with the latest technology."

"We will definitely be expanding this side of the business, approaching state schools with our courses as well as offering English and maths tuition."

● Tonks: www.tonks.com



VIRTUAL VIBES: Tutors

work at home, says Karen