

# Teaching language via the net

By Adam Courtney  
adamcourtney  
@trinitysouth.co.uk

**A WEYBRIDGE apartment block might seem an unlikely place from which to conduct a global business operation that employs 30 staff in 13 countries.**

But that is exactly what Karen and Mike Hollands are doing at their flat in Cavendish Road with their innovative, online language school, Toniks, which is about to celebrate its third birthday.

On course to turn over £100,000 this year, Toniks offers classes using free video calling technology from net telephone specialist Skype.

From bases all over the world – including Mexico, Egypt and Taiwan – native teachers, who are salaried employees of Toniks, conduct pre-arranged, hour-long lessons in real time with their students.

Recruitment, teacher training and course instruction are all conducted over Skype and, Karen, 42, believes selecting native-speaking teachers is by far the best way of getting the best out of students.

She said: “The culture element is very important and essential when it comes to teaching children. Because our team are native speakers, they have a profound knowledge of the culture and it gives them a distinct edge.”

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Karen, who has a background in law, and Mike, 45, who has worked in the international telecoms industry, came up with their idea while running their own language school in Brazil, believing their combined skills were ideal for running such an operation.

She said: “Doing something like this was always our dream – we just had to wait for the right technology, particularly for broadband to mature and stabilise. From then on the biggest



■ TECHNO TEACHER:  
Karen Hollands  
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challenge has been convincing our clients the technology is stable enough to be viable.”

To start-up, they took £15,000 from their savings account, investing most in their website and, with running costs low because Skype is free to use, further investment does not have to be substantial. Currently, lessons cost £23 each with a course of 20 in total.

Karen says the virtual learn-

ing world is more beneficial for students than a traditional one-on-one classroom experience, believing it forces them to concentrate harder.

“I have spoken to very experienced teachers and they say teaching online is as effective, if not more so,” she said.

The service has been introduced to schools as an extra-curricular activity, with Feltonfleet in Cobham one of the first to

sign up. Children represent a large part of the client base and Karen is keen to target the market further.

She said: “We will soon have other schools coming on board and we want to move into the state sector. All our teachers are fully vetted and the school teachers can sit in on the lessons, which we give to groups of four students at a time.”

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