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THE ROLE OF LANGUAGES IN ORGANIZATION INTERNATIONALISATION

It has been suggested that British firms may be losing out on valuable export sales because of their lack of language skills. The information presented in the article provides an insight into the role of language training and its relationship to export growth. The authors conclude that an external presence of UK firms is likely to depend to a great extent on strategic planning for language training.

Activity in export markets is becoming a more common feature of UK small firm behaviour, (O'Farrell et al, 1998). This is not confined to small manufacturing firms which might be expected to be active in foreign markets but service orientated small firms such as those selling product design, management consultancy, financial services, market research and computer software can also be seen as increasingly active in external markets. The reasons why manufacturing firms internationalise have been categorised by Ghoshal (1987) and Leonidou (1995). These categories include national differences between economies, scale and scope economies, the potential for extra sales, profit, growth, the intensity of competition in their domestic markets and saturation or shrinkage of domestic markets. It has been suggested by Lovelock (1988) amongst others that service sector firms may differ in their approaches to internationalisation, yet Segal-Horn (1998) argues that as a result of a combination of factors, service-industry dynamics are beginning to parallel those of manufacturing. Thus service businesses appear to be following similar development paths to internationalisation as those experienced by manufacturers.

A variety of modes have been offered as a means of accessing external markets such as exporting, joint ventures, partnerships, licensing and networking, or foreign direct investment (O'Farrell and Wood, 1994; Daniels, 1993, Sapir, 1993, Nicolaides, 1989).

The timing of moves into international markets has also been considered. For manufacturing small firms in particular, it is the exhaustion of sales performance growth in their domestic market which acts as a trigger (Curran and Blackburn 1994). For other types of firms, such as high technology small firms, internationalisation of their activities comes at an unusually early stage in their development, (Keeble et al 1998). Bloodgood et al (1995) and Autio et al (1997) amongst others, argue that early-stage internationalisation reflects exceptional awareness by unusually highly qualified entrepreneurs of high-return international market opportunities.

As a route to internationalisation there is some debate as to whether small firms follow an incremental path in terms of increasing knowledge, commitment and investment as suggested by Johanson and Vahlne, (1977) or whether the approach is more haphazard (Coviello and McAuley, 1996, and Coviello and Munroe 1997) Although the debate continues within this area, overall there has been a noticeable increase in export activity by small firms on a national scale since the advent of the single European market (Grant Thornton, 1996, Cosh and Hughes, 1996). However, although export activity has grown and English is seen as the prevalent European language of business it has been suggested that British firms may be losing out on valuable export sales because of their lack of foreign language skills (Hagen 1993; Institute of Manpower Studies, 1991). Schofield (1998, p1) cites an Institute for Employment Studies investigation of 2000 firms which found that, "60 per cent of firms conduct business with foreign-speaking clients, and 23 per cent say that a lack of a particular language is a barrier to business in certain countries". A survey of small and medium sized business by the Centre for Information on Language Teaching (CILT, 1993) also found that one-third of UK exporters lose out on trade opportunities because they have poor language skills.

Despite this evidence, language skills have been found to be a low priority area for senior managers. The Industrial Training Society reported that foreign languages and international competitiveness were the topics with least priority for training of senior managers (Schofield, 1998). These results confirm those of Bell et al (1996) who noted in their study of small and medium sized enterprises in Sussex that respondents did not feel that a knowledge of a foreign language was essential to carrying out business in overseas markets, since the majority of transactions were undertaken in English. Nonetheless, the need for better language training has been recognised by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) which seeks to promote language training for exporting firms through their "Languages for Export" campaign awards. In this respect the DTI also recognises the special needs of small firms by providing a special category of award for small firms.

Hagen (1993), has also pointed out that there are still gaps in our knowledge of language training within small firms, in particular drawing attention to the lack of information about how small firms deal with the issues of training for languages. A number of studies of language training and use in both large and small businesses have been carried out (e.g. Institute of Manpower Studies, 1991; Hagen 1993, Peel and Eckart, 1997): however, these approaches tended to rely on survey methods. The study reported here uses qualitative methods and focuses more on the detail of the practices of firms, predominantly small and medium sized, in their approach to language training and its impact on exporting.

Exports and business growth

Amongst the many factors which have been suggested as determinants of business growth are the starting resources of the entrepreneur(s), the characteristics of the firm and the strategy of the organisation. Languages, as noted earlier, are a relevant barrier to exporting and although small firms may favour exporting to areas of less cultural dissonance, (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977; Luostarinen and Welch, 1990), Imrie found that the approach to export markets by SMEs, "...is generally characterised by unsystematic approaches towards internationalisation and the development of export markets",(Imrie, et al 1997, p126). Here the process was often characterised by informal contact and even serendipity. Thus it might be argued that SMEs may prefer to be exporting to "safer areas" as suggested by Johanson and Vahlne (1997) and Luostarinen and Welch (1990), but they often find they are involved with external markets via the process of "piggy-back" entry through their relationship in supply-chain networks or through a move by a parent company into external markets for which they are less prepared, (O'Farrell et al, 1998). Therefore, general language competence, not only in languages currently being used but also in other languages outside current export markets, may be a more worthwhile strategy.

Exports in Northamptonshire

In 1995 a survey undertaken in Northamptonshire (Northamptonshire Chamber of Commerce Training and Enterprise, 1996) indicated that out of 13,300 large and small businesses, almost one in five organisations were involved in export activity. Nonetheless, only seven per cent said they had a need for staff with foreign language skills. Of these around two thirds were not satisfied with their level of language training within-house. The main languages sought were French, German, Italian and Spanish and this could be linked to the favoured destination of external activity - the European Union. It is against this background that our research has taken place.

The Study

In 1995 a large-scale survey of small firms was undertaken at University College Northampton (UCN) to ascertain the impact of the Single European Market on local firms. Out of the 250 respondents, only 20 stated that they provided language training for their employees at any level. These 20 respondents were then contacted again in 1997 to seek permission from the owner managers to take part in in-depth interviews about their language training requirements. Fifteen of the original respondents agreed to take part in the interview survey. These companies were a mixture of both small and medium sized enterprises and larger firms with headquarters in either Europe or the USA. The blend of independent and foreign owned companies allowed for comparisons to be made between attitudes and practices and reflected the diversity of the local business population. We should emphasise that the companies from which we elicited information represent the enlightened few from amongst our initial survey. This puts them ahead of the majority of companies, not just in the county of Northamptonshire but British industry as a whole (Swift and Smith, 1992).

Characteristics of the sample

Table 1 Relative size and number of interview sample

Number of employees	Number of organisations in each category
1-9	1
10 - 49	7
100 - 200	2
200 - 499	3
over 500	1

Table 1 indicates the relative size distribution of the organisations in our interview survey. Of these, twelve were manufacturers and the remainder were distributors/suppliers. This supports the findings of Keeble et al (1998) who noted that manufacturing firms, particularly high-technology companies were more likely to be involved with export markets. The manufacturers covered a diverse range of operations from heating equipment, switch manufacturing, through to furniture, cosmetics and analytical instruments. Eight companies had head offices in another country (Europe or the USA) and the others were UK based companies. The greater emphasis given by organisations which had EU parent companies to language training, is perhaps to be expected, though the one large organisation, a subsidiary of an American company, was similarly very active in language training.

Those companies, which were involved in exporting, focused this activity more closely on European markets, though there were others whose exports went outside of Europe, e.g. China and the US. This pattern of activity fitted closely that reported by a further study of SMEs in Northamptonshire (Northamptonshire Chamber of Commerce Training and Enterprise, 1996). For some of these companies exporting was a critical part of their business turnover (up to 80 per cent). The geographical pattern of their export activity supports the work of Holmlund and Kock (1998) and Caughey and Chetty (1994). These authors found that international activities in small-sized firms often starts with markets which are close in a cultural and/or geographical respect.

Although languages were seen as an important barrier to the growth in exports they were perceived as not as important as factors such as a "highly competitive market" or "bureaucratic obstacles". This result confirms the findings of barriers to export growth found in Welsh SMEs (Peel and Eckart, 1997). Nonetheless, Holmlund and Kock (1998) reported in their study of SMEs and internationalisation that a range of equally weighted factors were felt to be inhibitors to exporting, amongst which were: culture; geographical distance and language barriers.

Main languages used

French and German headed the list of both language competence and language training suggesting once again the geographical closeness of initial forays into export markets as noted by Erramilli (1991) and Johanson and Vahlne (1977), but some companies had a more dispersed market interest. Nonetheless, only two companies could be described as having global interests. Of these, one company trained its managers extensively in the languages of the countries involved. "We train individuals in a number of ways. Wouldn't train them on site, we would send them off to get the requirement, for example someone has recently spent six months in a crash course in Japanese". The other did no language training, but followed the policy of having negotiators in the specific countries and paying for translation for product details. The use of translators or agents and use of sales persons have been identified as two of the most important operational modes of moving into external markets, (Holmlund and Kock, 1998). The benefits from using agents are that they are already embedded in a business network. Furthermore, it is a way an exporting SME can compensate for lack of knowledge about foreign markets (including language skills) and reduce capital as well as minimising risk.

Type of Language Training

The initial picture of the kind of language training which the companies carried out, was very diverse, as might be expected from a sector whose lack of uniformity is well known. Both the requirements for language use and the ways of providing a level of language skills were particular to each company we spoke to. Training covered a range from no training at all to providing an in-house training course for ten to twelve employees at a time in the larger company. The requirements for languages varied from the need to have someone answer the phone and speak a few words, to one firm where exports were 80% of the business and detailed technical translations were required in several languages, together with a need to negotiate and deal with customers in those languages. This particular firm had overcome the problem by using outside translators and by hiring agents who are native speakers of the required country-specific languages. As Holmlund and Kock (1998) note above, this is one way of reducing the risks associated with exporting and can also be resource saving (O'Farrell et al, 1998).

One engineering company with a subsidiary in Germany had hired a native German speaker to give tuition and an individual programme encompassing the necessary technical terms was worked out. This was seen as a flexible method of providing fairly intensive language training because the trainer worked on a freelance basis and could fit tuition into the schedule of the staff. As Schofield (1998) notes, the traditional approach to language training is not always appropriate for small firms: programmes need to be relevant to business needs focusing on the specific vocabulary which you need to do business and flexible.

Other requirements were less fixed - for example, one company felt that they needed interpreters on an occasional basis but because they were involved in taking over an account, which involved more European exports, their need for some basic language skills would be growing. From these examples it can be seen that the responses to language training were as individual as the companies themselves.

As can be seen the most popular languages, which were in use and in which further training was required, were the mainstream European languages. There appeared to be little evidence that small firms in Northamptonshire had geared themselves up for either the Chinese or Asian markets. Once again this supports the view that small firms often start the move into external markets with those that are close culturally and/or geographically (Caughey and Chetty, 1994) and suggests that there was a lack of strategy towards developing expertise for wider or more diverse markets - a factor which can be linked to managerial attitudes and resources (Campbell, 1996, Cavusgil, 1984). Nonetheless our results may be influenced by the fact that our respondents mainly came from manufacturing and distribution companies. Where there is diversity of sectors on which small firm research can draw, O'Farrell et al (1998) found that a much wider choice of geographical markets could be identified.

Reasons for Language Training

It was not surprising to find that the main reasons why specific language training took place were connected to the location and language of their overseas subsidiary or related to the countries in which export activity was taking place. In this respect language use not only covered dealing with potential and active customers in these other countries but also concerned communicating with head-office staff in other countries and with partners in joint ventures. One company had a connection with Japan and they trained staff from their Japanese office in English skills. This training was fairly intensive and had met with considerable success. The trainees came for a period of a year and had one to one English teaching.

Our survey also pointed to the level of language competence that was required. Some required languages for negotiations, others for the translation of sales literature, the translation of internal documentation and communications with head office staff. Still others felt the need to have foreign language competence for undertaking transactions and speaking to overseas visitors. One respondent expressed the opinion that while fluency in technical terms was important, there was a wider issue about "getting to know people" which was helped by knowing enough of the language to deal with people at a social level.

Recognition of training needs

Some of the companies in our case study recognised the need to do something about their language competence and similarly identified that what was needed was not going on in their business:

"I've spoken to two Spanish customers and a Chilean customer. They can speak a little bit of English, but you can't rely on that....So I think it is sensible to teach British people to speak a foreign language....". A number of the companies told of "muddling-through" with negotiations and emphasised the success achieved with this approach. One even talked about the use of sign language. Another approach was to listen to a foreign speaker in their own language and reply in English.

Some of the small firms in our sample did have a strategy for language training. One company gave individual tuition to selected staff two or three times a week, finding that this was a better approach than group tuition. A popular approach for supplying language needs was to hire staff with facility in the particular language required. However this common practice had the drawback that when this key member of staff left it was not always possible to hire a replacement with similar language skills. In Northamptonshire it seemed particularly difficult to hire staff with both technical expertise and language training.

Preparing a strategy for training and actually achieving that plan is somewhat different, however. For some organisations the problem was with finding the right source of language training. The failure to find the right source tended to throw the responsibility onto the individual, not always with the appropriate consequence. One owner/manager commented: "...I started to learn technical French, but it was not practical. I couldn't get myself to the standard required." In addition there were a number of cases where the expertise in a particular language was associated with one individual and once they left, this skill was not replaced.

However, choosing which language to concentrate on is not always straightforward. One manager of a company with Dutch partners told us "We are almost better off learning French. Our French colleague doesn't want to speak English", although the Dutch partners spoke excellent English. This does suggest that small firms need to be adaptable to different external markets. O'Farrell et al. (1998) note that where English is the dominant business language in foreign markets then organisations dealt directly with clients. Where it was not, strategic alliances or joint ventures were adopted to overcome language difficulties. This also allowed UK firms to take account of cultural, linguistic, regulatory and technical standard differences in determining mode of entry.

Some of our small firms viewed language training to be a longer-term need and to be fitted in when other skills had been provided. "I have a young lad here who we have taken on as a trainee who is in his late teens and at the moment we are getting him into office skills and all sorts of other things. Eventually, perhaps in a year or two we will ask him if he would like to take a language course." This longer term perspective is also a reason why small companies in Britain do little language training since entrepreneurs look for an immediate return, and language training is a long-term investment (Schofield, 1998). Campbell (1996) also suggests that a strategy towards language training depends upon whether the small firm is reactive or proactive to export orders.

For small firms, resources are a key feature in the decision of whether to undertake language training or not. Because of the expense of training some companies overcame this problem by recruiting people already competent in languages, but as one manger pointed out, "They are linguists first and sales people second and it doesn't always work out very well. If you get top grade people with both, these are top grade people and you have to pay an awful lot of money." A converse view is put by Rosa et al. (1994) who point out that there are many language graduates who could become excellent export managers, but small firms overlook these people. Perhaps, however, it is the culture of the organisation and experience and skills of the owner managers that provide the trigger for exporting. Moini (1998) found a positive link between educational background of executives and regular exporting activity. Holmlund and Kock (1998) also note the fragility of exporting where the language competence and knowledge of external markets is embedded in one person.

Language Skills and Exporting

Cosh and Hughes (1996) in a recent survey of small and medium sized enterprises found that exporting intensity had grown appreciably between 1990 and 1995. The firms that were likely to be involved were younger, larger micro sized firms who had shown high degrees of innovation and were more likely to be in the manufacturing sector.

Our companies were attempting to address some of the language needs and were not oblivious to the requirements of the export trade as far as language training is concerned. Four of them identified "language difficulties" in the earlier questionnaire as being barriers to selling more of their products abroad. The fact that they did any training at all set them apart from the vast majority of small firms in our survey. The difficulties they face are particular to these firms although they might, perhaps, be recognised by other companies with similar products and export intentions. This notion of a positive link between languages as a stimulation for exporting, as exhibited by these firms in the Northamptonshire survey, was noted by Bilkey (1978). He argued that because firms were at different levels of export commitment, different support was needed and for those firms with a low intensity of export activity language training could provide a positive stimulation for export growth.

Although we have noted that a number of our sample companies had overcome language barriers through the use of agents, a disadvantage with this approach is the problem of recruiting suitable agents in the specific countries. This particular company acknowledged these recruitment difficulties in answer to the UCN questionnaire, giving the main difficulty in selling to new markets as being "difficulty in identifying/recruiting good sales agents".

One company certainly realised the deficiencies in this area, "Brazil is going to be a big area for us and someone needs to be able to speak Portuguese..." This feature was further emphasised by the fact that some companies felt that they needed negotiating skills in the languages of the countries to which they exported. In this respect speaking to visitors from overseas in their own language was seen as a desirable goal by SMEs, as was being able to hold brief conversations in other languages when doing business in other countries or visiting the parent company.

Conclusion

Organisational growth is important for organisational survivability. Growth can come about through further developing a presence in the domestic market through market expansions or product development. However, growth can also be achieved through the same mechanisms in external markets. Activity in export markets is not just the prerogative of large organisations: there is increasing evidence, (Moseley ,1996; and Moini 1998) of small firms penetrating overseas markets. There are many modes of entry into export markets such as exporting, joint ventures, partnerships, and piggy-back approaches but the process may be inhibited through the failure of both government export programmes and organisations to address some of the difficulties faced through internationalisation. The information presented here in the case studies provides an insight into the role of language training and its relationship to export growth.

Companies may be losing out in export markets due to their poor language training. At the same time some companies appear to be hesitant to do anything about this, reflecting a problem that some see as indigenous to UK organisations - short-termism combined with a lack of suitable training provision. If the majority of executives in UK organisations employing less than 500 employees cannot negotiate in another language compared with 90 per cent or more of executives of similar sized businesses in Belgium, Denmark, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands then this does not bode well for export sales. A survey of French, German, Italian, Swedish and UK marketers (Turnbull and Welham, 1985) concluded that UK marketers had been constrained in their commercial activities by relatively poor language skills and although the evidence is not conclusive a number of studies (Dichtl et al, 1990 and Weaver and Pak, 1990) have suggested that exporting firms are led by decision makers who have better language skills than non-exporting firms. Even though language barriers are considered to be an important, though not the major factor in inhibiting export growth (Peel and Eckart, 1997), language skill and language competence does matter in gaining access to export markets and for organisational growth.

The evidence from our case studies suggests that access to export markets will continue to be constrained whilst great variations exist in the access to and suitability of language training courses. Some courses are too long, others too general and furthermore they provided a more long-term solution to language needs. Moreover, some are costly and could tie-up valuable members of staff for too long. Language training sometimes appeared to be a "luxury" rather than a "necessity" and was therefore downgraded in importance. The needs for different types of language training should also be recognised since this may vary as small firms move through different stages of the internationalisation process ranging from indirect internationalisation as a small firm becomes a sub-contractor for a larger organisation which has already internationalised through to a firm which has been actively involved in export markets for some time on its own (Cafferata and Mensai, 1995).

Although size may play an important factor in a firm's commitment to export, (Czinkota and Johnston, 1983 and Samiee and Walters, 1990), Moini, (1992) and Culpan, (1989) have also linked the size of the firm to export assistance needs. In particular for smaller firms to succeed in exporting they suggest executives need to work hard, travel a great deal, develop language skills, and make exporting a priority.

The problems of languages training and exporting may be resolved through improved links between higher and further education establishments. There is an important link between university education and the organisation's export involvement, (Moini, 1998). It would be difficult to transport the decision-maker from the organisation to the classroom: however, language training programs could be conducted off-campus by education providers. This idea of bringing education providers and the business sector closer together, with an emphasis on language training, has been proposed by the European Commission (European Commission, 1997). But for language programmes to support exporting then small firms need to have knowledge of these. It appears that many of these programmes fail to reach their target audience (Moini 1998; Kedia and Chhokar,1986).

Firms are inventive in the use of strategies to deal with their need for languages but this could perhaps be better co-ordinated so that there is maximum use of staff with language skills. Here the use of co-operative networks between SMEs may prove of use. However, it is recognised that such networks have their limitations given that some of the SMEs may be direct competitors.

Competition in external markets is likely to increase after the development of the single currency, as market discrepancies due to differences in currency valuations are removed. After a single currency comes into operation German consumers, say, may not physically move to buy cheaper products in other countries but be able to compare prices in Euros for the same products in Ireland, Finland or in the UK. Coupled with the growth of mail order business and internet sales, markets and products will be opened-up and this may require a greater need for organisations to converse in foreign languages. For smaller organisations in the UK, domestic markets which appeared to be fairly immune from foreign competition are likely to become more competitive. As a result they will need to become more active exporters to survive. Language skills provide a mode of access into successful external forays. However, from the results of our case studies, an external presence is likely to depend as much on serendipity as on strategic planning for language training.

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