

# *Language Management Strategies in Austrian and Slovenian SMES*

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According to the ELAN study and a substantial body of previous research, a significant amount of business is being lost in the EU due to a lack of language skills. In our article, we analyse how Austrian and Slovenian small and medium-sized enterprises (SMES) adopt language management strategies (LMSS). We investigate, by means of a questionnaire sent to Slovenian and Austrian SMES, how aware they are of the ELAN findings, what language strategies they have adopted and whether the knowledge of English is sufficient for their successful business operations on global markets. The findings show that Slovenian exporting SMES are not completely aware of the benefits a language management strategy could bring to their business operations on foreign markets. In contrast, Austrian exporting SMES are more likely to provide language training for their staff, employ native speakers, and use local agents for their language needs considerably more often, as well as use the services of professional translators and interpreters almost three times more often.

*Key Words:* ELAN study, foreign language skills, language management strategy, SMES

*JEL Classification:* L1, Z13

<https://doi.org/10.26493/1854-6935.15.365-378>

## **Introduction**

When the ELAN (Effects on the European Union Economy of Shortages of Foreign Language Skills in Enterprise) study was published ten years ago, the link between foreign language skills and the exporting success of European SMES was uncovered (European Commission 2006). Despite the fact that the research commissioned by the Directorate General for Education and Culture of the European Commission prepared recommendations for action at local, regional, national and European level, it appears that not enough has been done in order to improve the situation

in European SMEs with regard to language skills, cultural competences and exporting performance.

In 2004, the research carried out by the UK Subject Centre for Languages (Gallagher-Brett 2004) identified more than 700 reasons to study languages, which were arranged into a set of the following categories: citizenship, communication, economic, social and political dimensions, democracy, diversity, employability, environmental sustainability, equal opportunities, globalization, identity, intercultural competence, international dimension and foreign policy, key skills, language awareness, mobility/travel, multilingualism, personal and social development of the individual and values. Our research directly addresses only some economic issues related to foreign language skills in exporting SMEs.

It is interesting to note that the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM), the world's foremost study of entrepreneurship, never mentions linguistic obstacles in their annual global reports. During the last ten years only the 2012 Global Report reported that 'language and cultural barriers may limit employment opportunities' (GEM 2012). The world's foremost study of entrepreneurship that strives to understand the entrepreneurial phenomenon seems to have overlooked the problem of foreign language skills in global entrepreneurial endeavours. Similarly, in the period from 2010 to 2014, Slovenia GEM reports never mentioned the importance of language skills for enterprises, let alone the connection between language skills and higher profits, revenues and market share of companies on the one hand and the lack of them that may lead to failed transactions and lost business opportunities on the other.

A language management strategy (LMS) is a set of measures and techniques used to prevent linguistic barriers from occurring in new foreign markets. The strategy addresses specific communication issues relevant to the particular market, many of which can be transferred to other markets.

Companies entering new markets should adapt their strategy to new linguistic and cultural needs. Among the many elements, the following language strategies can bring benefits to exporting enterprises: recruiting native speakers from your target markets, appointing company employees who already possess language skills, using professional translators and/or interpreters, developing a language plan or strategy for handling communication barriers before you start exporting to a particular country, language training for staff, cooperation with universities and multilingual websites.

## Literature Review

Strategic language management is a nascent field within management research. It is defined as ‘the extent to which the company is able to satisfy its language needs through prudent deployment of a variety of language management tools including for example language training and expatriation’ (Feely and Winslow 2005). The link between foreign language skills and export success has been studied at both a macroeconomic and microeconomic level. At the macroeconomic level, researchers try to answer the question how language variables affect economic variables. Multilingualism studies carried out at the University of Geneva arrived at the conclusion that Swiss multilingualism generated 9% of GDP (Grin, Vaillancourt and Sfreddo 2009). Not mastering a foreign language is seen by Foreman-Peck (2007) as a tax on trade, Frankel and Rose (2002) and Helliwell (1999) have quantified the cost of language barriers as between 15% and 22% in terms of tariff equivalents. At the microeconomic level, researchers measure the impact of the lack of language skills on export performance. The ELAN study (European Commission 2006) and the British Chamber of Commerce language survey (Sidnick 2004) belong to this type of research.

Half a billion citizens working in more than 22 million enterprises in 28 member states that use three alphabets and 23 official languages are often unable to fully exploit the opportunities offered by the single market. Whether they work in multinational companies or SMES, they are rarely aware of the state of their language resources.

According to some authors, strategic language management can contribute positively to company competitive advantages (Dhir and Gòkè-Pariolá 2002; Hagen 2011; Marschan, Welch, and Welch 1997; Forman-Peck and Zhou 2014).

The ‘Report on Language Management Strategies and Best Practice in European SMES’ (2011, 4) recommends the following language management strategies (LMSS): use of local agents to solve language problems, creation of websites with special cultural and/or linguistic adaptations, use of linguistic audits, use of professional translators/interpreters, translation of promotional sales and/or technical materials, language training and cultural briefing schemes, online language learning, employee selection and recruitment policy, staff mobility, ‘buddying’ with foreign colleagues and cross-border secondment schemes, forging links with local universities, taking on foreign students on placement, native-speaker re-

cruitment, e-commerce involving multilingual operations and product or packaging adaptation in line with local tastes and customs.

Impact analysis derived from the 'Report on Language Management Strategies and Best Practice in European SMEs' (2011, 21) shows that adopting an LMS has been linked to a 25% increase in export sales of 41% of surveyed companies, with a further 35% of companies who reported a 16–25% increase and 18% of companies who reported an increase between 6 and 15%. Only 6% of companies reported an increase of between 1% and 5%. The two most cited aspects were multilingual website adaptation and use of local agents to solve language problems.

### Methods

The research for this study comprised of a questionnaire-based survey and national and international literature review.

In order to find out how small and medium-sized enterprises, which are active in some form of international activity, tackle language barriers, a questionnaire was sent to 150 Slovenian small and medium-sized enterprises through electronic mail towards the end of 2016. We received 79 responses that could be used in our research.

For the Austrian sample, we conducted an online questionnaire. This questionnaire was distributed in January and March 2017 by the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber (Wirtschaftskammer Österreich) in Styria. The Austrian Federal Economic Chamber is divided in seven divisions, comprising the sectors crafts and trades, industry, commerce, bank and insurance, transport and communications, tourism and leisure industries, information and consulting. The questionnaire was sent to 3,319 SMEs. 2,421 of these companies had one to nine employees, 709 companies had ten to 49 employees and 189 had 50 to 249 employees. A total of 90 institutions submitted valuable data. The response rate was 3.74%.

The closed-ended questionnaire sent to the surveyed companies comprised of only 13 questions. All except one question were in the form of multiple choices with three to five provided answers. One question was in the tick-all-that-apply format. Taking into account the fact that people are often reluctant about taking surveys we wanted to make our questionnaire as short as possible and still gather enough valuable data for our research.

### Findings

In order to get a picture of the size of the companies surveyed, our first question was about the percentage of their sales turnover that was ex-

ported. If a responding company answered 0%, it was excluded from the survey. We were interested in whether the surveyed companies had a management strategy, if this strategy was available in a written document, and whether the company believed that there was a link between the use of foreign languages and export performance. In addition, we inquired whether the companies surveyed believed that their investments in language skills had a significant return, whether they employed native speakers, used local agents and/or professional translators and interpreters for their language needs and whether they hired staff with language skills to match their foreign markets. We also wanted to know if companies had lost a contract due to the lack of foreign language skills, because we wanted to see whether our findings are in any way similar to the findings of the ELAN study (European Commission 2006), where nearly half of the surveyed companies said they had a language management strategy, and where one in ten enterprises stated they had lost a contract due to the lack of foreign languages.

The questionnaire was sent to selected Slovenian SMES in 2016 and to the Austrian SMES at the beginning of 2017. We received 92 questionnaires from Slovenian SMES in due time, of which 79 were complete and could be used in further analysis, and 256 from Austrian SMES in March 2017. After incomplete questionnaires were excluded from the sample, 90 Austrian SMES were used for further analysis. Our combined sample comprised respondents from 169 Austrian and Slovenian SMES (enterprises with zero exports and with more than 250 employees were excluded).

The majority of Slovenian companies belonged to the group of companies that export between 21% and 40% of their turnover (39%). This group was followed by companies that belonged to the group that exported between 1% and 10% of their turnover (28%). The third group of companies exported more than 40% of their turnover (20%). Only 13% of surveyed companies exported between 11% and 20% of their turnover.

As for the surveyed Austrian SMES, the largest group of SMES comprised those companies that exported between 1% and 10% of their turnover (50%), followed by the group of companies that exported more than 40% (slightly more than 23%) and SMES that exported between 21% and 40% of their turnover and between 11% and 20% of their turnover (slightly more than 13%). The analysis of the answers provided by surveyed companies brought us to the results presented in table 1.

- 58% of Slovenian SMES believe there is a link between the use of

TABLE 1 Elements of a Language Management Strategy

Item		SLO	AT
Link between languages and performance	Yes	73	77
	No	10	11
	Do not know	17	12
Investments in language skills and returns	Yes	53	48
	No	14	19
	Do not know	33	33
Employment of formal LMS	Yes	20	18
	No	49	78
	Do not know	31	4
Employment of native speakers	Yes	15	49
	No	46	50
	Do not know	39	1
Use of local agents	Yes	19	54
	No	44	44
	Do not know	37	1
Use of translators and interpreters	Yes	10	33
	No	38	64
	Do not know	52	2
Hiring of staff with language skills	Yes	34	50
	No	28	64
	Do not know	38	4
Lost contracts due to the lack of language skills	Yes	8	7
	No	30	79
	Do not know	62	14

NOTES All values as percentages.

foreign languages and export performance; 10% of the companies do not share the same opinion and 17% of companies do not know if such a link exists.

- 77% of Austrian SMEs see a link between the use of foreign languages and export performance, followed by almost 11% of SMEs who do not see such a link and 12% of companies that do not know whether such a link exists.
- 53% of Slovenian and 48% of Austrian SMEs believe that their in-

vestment in language skills has a significant return; 14% of Slovenian and 19% of Austrian SMEs do not believe so and a third of surveyed enterprises, Slovenian and Austrian, do not know if this is the case.

- Only 20% of surveyed Slovenian SMEs have a formal LMS. 62% of enterprises stated that they did not have such a strategy and slightly less than one-fifth (18%) of the companies do not know whether such a strategy exists in their company.

As for the Austrian SMEs, slightly more than 18% of companies have an LMS, 78% stated that they do not have such a strategy and 4% of SMEs do not know whether the company has such a strategy.

- 15% of Slovenian SMEs and 49% of Austrian SMEs employ native speakers; 76% of Slovenian companies do not employ native speakers (as compared to 50% of Austrian SMEs) and 9% of Slovenian SMEs do not know whether they have employed native speakers (and slightly more than 1% of Austrian SMEs).
- Slightly less than one-fifth (19%) of Slovenian SMEs use local agents for their language needs; 70% of Slovenian SMEs do not use local agents and 11% of companies do not know whether they use local agents. On the other hand, more than half of Austrian SMEs (54,4%) use local agents for their language needs, 44% do not use them and 1.1% of Austrian SMEs do not know if they have ever used local agents.
- Professional translators and interpreters are used by only 10% of surveyed Slovenian SMEs and 33% of Austrian enterprises; 79% of Slovenian SMEs and 64% of Austrian SMEs do not use the services of professional translators and interpreters and 11% of Slovenian and 2% of Austrian SMEs do not know whether they use such services.
- Slightly more than one-third of Slovenian SMEs (34%) hire staff with language skills to match their foreign markets; slightly more than a half of them (52%) do not hire such staff and 14% of companies do not know whether such staff have been hired. Fifty per cent of Austrian SMEs hire such staff, 46% do not hire such staff and almost 4% do not know whether such staff has been hired.
- As for the lost contracts due to the lack of foreign language skills, only 8% of Slovenian SMEs and an even smaller percentage of Austrian SMEs (slightly less than 7%) believe that they have lost contracts due to language barriers; slightly less than a third of Slovenian

TABLE 2 Language Management Strategies and SMES

Item	SLO	AT
Recruiting native speakers from your target markets	37	31
Appointing company employees who already possess language skills	87	81
Using professional translators and/or interpreters	56	31
Developing a language plan/strategy for handling communication barriers before you start exporting	37	19
Language training for staff	31	50
Cooperation with universities	6	6
Multilingual websites	94	38

SMES and 79% of Austrian SMES believe that they have not lost contracts due to the lack of language skills. Almost 62% of Slovenian and 14% of Austrian SMES do not know whether they have ever lost contracts because of the lack of language skills.

In table 2 we present various LMSS employed by 16 Slovenian and 16 Austrian enterprises. In the surveyed sample, only 16 Slovenian SMES and 16 Austrian SMES had a formal LMS. Fifty per cent of Slovenian and 78% of Austrian SMES clearly stated that they did not have such a strategy. 31% of Slovenian and 4% of Austrian SMES were not sure whether their company has such a strategy.

- Twelve out of 16 Slovenian SMES believed that there is a correlation between having a language strategy and a company's performance, four Slovenian SMES did not know if that was the case. As for the Austrian SMES, slightly less than 63% of enterprises see such a correlation. On the other hand, there are 13% of SMES in Austria that do not see such a correlation and 25% that do not know whether such a correlation exists.
- Of the 16 Slovenian SMES with an LMS only two had a formal language strategy contained in a written document, two did not know if such a document existed and 12 enterprises answered that they did not possess such a document. A total of 62.5% of Austrian SMES did not have a written document outlining their LMS, more than 31.3% did not know whether such a document existed and the remaining 31.3% said that they had a formal written document for their language strategy.
- The majority of Slovenian SMES (94%), but only 38% of Austrian



SMES have a multilingual website. The second most important strategy for Slovenian SMES is appointing people who already have language skills (87%), followed by the use of professional translators and interpreters (56%). The recruitment of native speakers from a company's target markets and the development of a language plan or strategy prior to export activities to new markets is an approach shared by 37% of Slovenian SMES, but only 21% of Austrian SMES. Language training for staff is provided by 31% of Slovenian and slightly less than 50% of Austrian SMES. Only one Slovenian and one Austrian SME mentioned cooperation with universities.

- Sixty-five per cent of surveyed Slovenian enterprises and only 43% of Austrian SMES believed that English is not enough for their export activities, while 35% of Slovenian and almost 57% of Austrian SMES still believed that English as a foreign language met all their communication needs with regard to exporting.

As seen from tables, there are some outliers. Slovenian SMES believe that having multilingual websites is of utmost importance if they want to boost sales, which is why twice as many respondents from Slovenia reported that multilingual websites were a part of their language strategy. On the other hand, Austrian SMES use professional translators and/or interpreters more often as their Slovenian counterparts do.

There is also a considerably higher percentage of Slovenian SMES that used 'I do not know' as the answer. More than 60% of Slovenian respondents responded in this way to the last statement ('Lost contracts due to the lack of language skills.'). and more than 50% did not know whether they use the services of translators and interpreters.

## **Discussion**

Both Slovenian and Austrian small and medium-sized enterprises should actively encourage multilingualism, while at the same time broadening the choice of languages; businesses, both micro enterprises and multinational companies alike, should develop creative and dynamic language strategies, adapted to the individual possibilities of organizations. Language management approaches should include the recruitment of native speakers with language skills; company websites adapted to languages other than the national language; the use of translators and interpreters; and employers may find it useful to offer language training to their staff. Finally, schools should aim at boosting the number of people with a sec-

ond or third foreign language. High-quality language learning should be available for children from the age of five, with a goal that all students gain a good language qualification by the end of secondary school. In addition, the role of university language departments is enormous, both with regard to developing expertise in modern languages as well as when teaching languages for specific purposes (in language departments at faculties of economics, business and similar institutions). In tertiary education language learning and language teaching need to become more applied and practice-oriented, with more emphasis on conversational ability than full fluency. Students should be encouraged to spend a period of mobility in another European country. A lack of language skills may also have a negative impact on mobility in the job market.

In the future, the need for language skills is most likely to increase. According to the ELAN study carried out in 2006 (European Commission 2006), in slightly less than half of the countries surveyed, at least 50% of respondents believed they would need additional language skills in the next three years. Ten years after, raising language awareness is equally if not more important. Businesses should be encouraged to record, exploit and develop language skills available within their companies. They should find ways to provide language training for employees, provide work experience opportunities for foreign students and employees, make use of migrant workers' language skills and seek opportunities to collaborate with educational institutions in order to support language education and training.

### **Conclusion**

Our research confirmed that 65% of Slovenian and 43% of Austrian SMES believed that English was not enough for satisfying every communication need. If individuals want to remain employable and companies open new markets and new business opportunities, they should embrace multilingualism. Despite the fact that English is the most studied language in the world, with about two billion learners projected in the next decade, and a preferred language for intra-company communication in many global companies as well as in medium-sized ones, not everyone speaks or wants to speak English. *The Language Guide for European Business* (2011) mentions a survey, which showed that languages other than English are used by more than a third of all companies and that four out of ten companies have experienced more or less serious communication problems with trade partners in other countries as a result of linguistic deficits. In

a similar vein, The Austrian Institut für Bildungsforschung der Wirtschaft published a report (Archan and Holzer 2006) projecting future language needs in Austria, stating that companies will need Italian, Czech, Slovak and Hungarian. Our research also showed that only a small percentage of Slovenian exporting enterprises employ LMSS and that even fewer have their language strategy contained in a written document. Despite the fact that 73% of Slovenian and 77% of Austrian SMES believed that there was a link between the use of languages and export performance they rarely employ such a strategy.

The contribution of foreign languages to competitiveness is too obvious to be doubted. It may appear that English will keep its leading role as the world business language, but knowing other foreign languages may give individuals and enterprises a competitive edge. A lack of foreign language skills may not always lead to direct losses, but may dissuade enterprises from entering new markets. Sixty-five per cent of Slovenian and 43% of Austrian SMES were aware that English as a foreign language was not enough. On the other hand, only 8% of Slovenian and an even lower percentage (7%) of Austrian SMES said that they had lost a contract due to the lack of foreign language skills, while 62% of Slovenian and roughly 14% of Austrian SMES admitted that they did not know whether this had happened.

In summary, our recommendations for Slovenian and Austrian enterprises are the following: review your language needs in particular markets against the checklist provided above; take action to implement an LMS appropriate to your markets; evaluate the cost-effectiveness of the various language management techniques; network with other SMES, share resources, and good practices. Finally yet importantly, educational institutions should also be aware of the importance of their role as support service providers in the area of language training. Higher Education institutions (HEIS) should seek opportunities to make contact with local international SMES for knowledge exchange purposes and for the development of relevant services for local businesses. Both improved communication between HEI and businesses and the transfer of good practices can improve the situation and this has been emphasized by other authors (Babnik and Trunk Širca 2014; Distanont, Haapasalo and Vaananen 2014; Feria and Hidalgo 2011).

The ubiquity of documents produced by various institutions of the EU will not suffice in the absence of immediate action carried out by small and medium-sized enterprises. Many SMES are not aware of fund-

ing possibilities available within several community programmes; some regard application procedures as too cumbersome and time-consuming, others, micro enterprises and nascent enterprises, and simply lack funds to invest in language education or appropriate language management strategies. In the next decades, foreign language skills are going to become more important than ever, even for people whose mother tongue is English. We are thus likely to consider learning Mandarin, Arabic, Russian, and Spanish, Portuguese or Turkish or any other language spoken in the territory that is now considered an emerging market. Not only will this help businesses, it might also help enhance our ability to simply understand one another better, to increase our awareness of different cultures and ways of thinking (Kohonen et al. 2014), or even increase creativity and enhance our overall mental ability (Adesope et al. 2010).

In addition to the above-mentioned, it is important – because of the impact of LMSS on a company's bottom line – to raise awareness among SMES of the commercial value of using language strategies and to promote ideas leading to the increase in the volume of European SMES implementing an LMS in trade. Companies unwilling to enhance their repertoire of foreign languages are at risk of becoming less competitive and incapable of operating in today's globalized world. According to our research, only 30% of Slovenian SMES (and 50% of Austrian SMES) provide language training for their staff. In addition to face-to-face classroom-based language learning, companies should think about blended language learning (a combination of online and face-to-face learning) combined with guided self-study, as has been recommended in many previous studies (Albrecht 2006; Conrad 2002; Marquis 2004; Rižnar 2009).

Our research was limited to a small sample of Slovenian (79) and a slightly larger sample of Austrian SMES (90). Future research could focus on one industry in a certain area. If the majority of Slovenian SMES chosen were located in the Štajerska region (bordering to Austria) or in the Primorska region (bordering to Italy) the research results might be different. Similarly, if companies from only one industry were chosen, the research results may also differ from ours. Further research could thus concentrate on either one region or a single export-oriented industry.

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