THE USE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES BY IRISH EXPORTERS

Christine Cromie, Bill Clarke and Stanley Cromie*

Introduction

While many firms are content with their existing output and have no desire to grow, there are many who do want to expand operations. If this is the case they will often first of all seek expansion in the domestic market. However, in the highly competitive world of today domestic markets are sometimes saturated and expansion through exporting offers possibilities. Clarke (1991) found this to be true for a sample of firms studied in Northern Ireland. Almost 60% of his sample considered exporting to be very important for their future prosperity and 90% considered it to be quite important, although he notes that these perceptions are "slightly at odds with ... more objective measures of the importance of exporting". Furthermore, as the Northern Ireland domestic market is too small, government policy aims for "growth through exporting" (Industrial Development Board, Chief Executive).

Exporting can also benefit national economies. In the early 1980s Ireland had a very serious balance of payments problem, yet McAleese and Gallagher (1991) report that by the late 1980s the problem had been overcome and that:

> ...the export sector was the predominant factor in explaining the turnaround. Irish exporters have consistently outperformed market growth and ... have generated the large net foreign exchange earnings which have underpinned Ireland's strong current balance of payments position.

Exporting can benefit firms and economies, but it is not easy. In this article some of the factors which are necessary for successful exporting, most particularly an understanding of overseas cultures and competence in foreign languages, will be examined.

Objectives

This study seeks to understand the extent to which major Northern Ireland exporters use foreign languages when doing business and their attitudes towards communicating in foreign languages. In addition, information is sought on their appreciation of cultural norms in the countries with which they have contacts. Specifically, the objectives are:

* University of Ulster at Jordanstown

IBAR – Irish Business and Administrative Research, Volume 18, 1997, pp 16-33

- To explore the attitudes of leading exporters towards the use of foreign languages
- To enquire about the companies' view of how language proficiency can assist their exporting activities
- To uncover the degree of foreign language proficiency in these firms
- To investigate the level and nature of their foreign language training
- To discover how aware the firms are of cultural differences

Issues in Exporting

Barriers to exporting: It may be argued that exporting is a desirable activity for company and national growth but it has its complications. The main problems have been defined as: a lack of human and financial resources; insufficient market knowledge; inadequate managerial expertise and experience; exchange rate fluctuations; delays in payment; distribution difficulties; cash/profitability; perceived isolation of Northern Ireland; communication problems - including cultural and language difficulties (Clarke, 1991; Bell, 1995).

Although there are many difficulties, this paper shall focus on some of the problems connected with exploring overseas markets. Knowledge is needed to uncover specific customers and this can be done by reviewing market data and investigating the cultural beliefs which underpin buyer behaviour. In addition exporters must learn how to do business with overseas associates. Understanding culture and business practice is made easier if exporters can communicate effectively with their partners.

Sources of export information: Once potential exporters determine the information they want for marketing decision-making many secondary sources are available but the major criticism of this data is that it is too broad to assist companies targeting niche or specialised micro markets (Diamantopolous et al, 1993). It has been suggested that exporters face serious problems in identifying potential customers and in obtaining specific information about particular export markets (Clarke, 1991). In order to obtain more customised data many potential exporters carry out their own primary research through market research agencies, attending trade fairs, exhibitions, or through visiting the target market themselves (Clarke, 1991). A knowledge of foreign language and culture should assist exporters in gathering market information by face-to-face means.

Culture and consumption: It is important to identify directly the needs and wants of consumers in a country and their impact on buyer behaviour but these needs are often underpinned by key cultural beliefs. Therefore a proper investigation of the market potential of a country should include an understanding of culture and its impact upon buyer behaviour. Pugh and Hickson (1991) define culture as "the shared values that typify a society and lie beneath its ... arts, architecture, food, clothes and ways of working together". In other words there are many elements in the culture of a society including: the material culture; its aesthetics; religious beliefs; education; and social organisation which will impact upon buyer behaviour (Bell, 1995).

Culture can have a dramatic impact on consumption but in other instances the consequences are more subtle. For example, Humphreys (1990) interviewed several people who do business in France and noted that "France is a nation that judges others very much by their appearance". French people like to dress well and do not like to address the harsh realities of life. Consequently advertisements must project a "perfect and desirable world" not harsh reality. Goods and services must reflect this soft, idealised image of the world.

In general successful exporters must understand how potential foreign customers think. They must step into the customers' shoes and hence provide goods or services which are attractive to them. To do so exporters must fully appreciate cultural norms and the manner in which they influence purchasing decisions and then adapt their products in an appropriate manner.

Business norms and international negotiation: Culture can impact upon buyer behaviour but exporters have to do business in foreign countries; they must build working relationships with others and cultural awareness allows them to do their business more effectively. The best way to understand another culture is to visit the host country and observe the cultural etiquette. Unfortunately many exporters neglect this aspect of doing business. For example, Graham and Herberger (1983) made a detailed study of how Americans do business abroad and found that there are strong cultural clashes when they deal with others. They argue that Americans are "inherently competitive, argumentative and impatient" and this causes problems in dealing with people who do not adopt these behaviours. In addition, Americans are quite informal when doing business and are not overly concerned with status. However, many countries have strict status hierarchies based on age, gender, social class or religion and failure to recognise and deal with these issues can cause problems. In general, Graham and Herberger feel that for Americans their "lack of knowledge about other cultures is losing [them] business overseas". This problem has been recognised by American exporters and it is interesting to note that in recent years their cultural awareness has improved substantially (Brake, Walker and Walker, 1995).

Impact of language on exporting success: Although many successful exporting companies are not competent in foreign languages and feel them to be unimportant (Swift, 1991) it has been argued that foreign language ability facilitates exporting success (Miles, 1993; Enderwick and Arkoorie, 1994). Many exporters are successful without foreign language competencies but it is contended that they would do even better if they could communicate effectively in the language of their export partners. As Quinn (1996) points out a "well implemented language strategy takes the 'beginners luck' out of exporting and injects far more security for continued growth. Customers respond better when you demonstrate your commitment to their country by learning their language ... hence profits increase". In today's environment export competition is world-wide and competitors may have a decided edge if they can communicate in the language of the target market (Bell, 1995). Swift (1991) argues that "British executives will continue to operate at a disadvantage as long as they maintain no more than a passing interest in learning foreign languages"; Shipman (1992) and Kellaway (1992) also support this view. Language ability is not the only ingredient leading to export success but it is an important factor in achieving optimal results.

Language barriers: Foreign language deficiency not only leads to inferior verbal and written communication but it also greatly impairs the ability of one party to understand and appreciate the culture of another (Hendricks, 1992; Wickland, 1992). Swift (1991) states "culture is a key to the market and it therefore follows that when language becomes a barrier to communication it affects more than mere verbal communication: it also affects one's ability to interpret the market culture". Glees (1986) and Simms and Guice (1992) support this viewpoint; they argue that foreign language ability "ensures greater accuracy of communication ... [and enhances] sensibility to customs, tastes and patterns of consumption". This form of empathy with one's export partner promotes psychological "closeness" in terms of sharing language and culture and this generally leads to improved export performance, particularly in the long-term (Ford 1989; Dichtl, 1990).

To export successfully negotiations must be effective. Foreign language ability offers exporters a chance to smooth negotiations by encouraging an environment where a relationship of trust can develop (Cunningham, 1982). When exporters do not have language skills they inadvertently exclude themselves from the possibility of achieving personal closeness with their (potential) export partners (Holden, 1989) and this may have far reaching and damaging results (Turnball and Cunningham, 1981; Cadbury, 1987). Language plays a vital role "in the process of interaction and communication between different cultures" (Swift, 1991).

One can appreciate why many British managers regard language ability as superfluous because English *is* the international business language of the world (Edwards, 1990). However, they are disadvantaging themselves in seeking export opportunities.

The role of language proficiency in exporting

What of those exporters who cannot communicate in the language of their export partners? In order to bridge the gap many firms use agents, interpreters, translators or sales subsidiaries. However, using intermediaries may present drawbacks: they may prevent the exporter from establishing a "closeness" to the target market; furthermore, agents may divulge confidential information at the expense of the exporter (Graham, 1987). Additional problems may arise when using an interpreter, no matter how linguistically fluent, given that it is ideas as well as words that must be conveyed during communications (Arjona, 1978; Gruber, 1976). Concepts must be translated accurately or the exporter may be misrepresented (Swift, 1991; Sussman and Johnson, 1992; and

Tyler, 1991). Harvey-Jones (1988) highlighted the necessity for translators to be familiar with the culture of the host country, arguing that a first-hand knowledge is required of both the national culture and the industry within which one is negotiating. After all "language is not a computer programme, and indeed the actual literal translation of words can cause offence out of all proportion". Further references to the importance of accurate cross-cultural communications are made by Willmer and Holden (1983) and by Batchelor (1988) regarding the translation of company sales brochures and other literature. The end brochure must be attractive to the target audience and present accurate, technically-correct and culturally acceptable information.

It is clear that language proficiency is helpful in that it helps exporters "to interpret foreign business environments" (Holden, 1989) but there are numerous languages and fluency in one, not to mention several, languages is difficult to attain. Indeed, it has been suggested that "those negotiating complex or particularly critical issues should keep to their native language, unless they are fluent linguists" (Hill Samuel Bank Study, 1989). If they incorrectly convey the issues as they see them , exporters may inadvertently damage the negotiations or agree different terms than they really intended.

In summary, the ability to communicate in the language of your export partners and to understand their culture are useful ingredients for effective exporting. However, these factors cannot be viewed as "instant remedies for ... socio-cultural problems encountered when dealing with foreign markets" (Swift, 1991). One must be able to establish relationships with export clients at many different levels. Language ability offers exporters the opportunity to establish market closeness and the chance to examine the target market in detail. Language ability is a tool for facilitating greater ease of exporting, for broadening exporters' horizons and enhancing their acceptability to potential export clients. However, it should be noted that companies can get by without language skill and they must also be proficient in the business of exporting itself.

Methodology

To investigate these issues interviews were carried out with 20 exporting companies. In the absence of a definitive list of exporters a "convenience sample" was selected on the advice of local experts. The "export manager" of each company was contacted in order to set up a personal interview to gather relevant information by means of a pretested standard questionnaire.

The questionnaire presented to each interviewee comprised 30 questions which addressed the following broad issues:

- Company background and attitudes towards foreign language use
- The impact of and actual proficiency in foreign language usage
- Level and nature of foreign language communication
- Awareness of cultural differences

Some background data and factual information was elicited using closed questions but the majority were open ended. Therefore it was possible to explore matters in some detail. In general open questions "provide rich data, offer the opportunity to establish rapport with interviewees, and help to explore and understand complex issues" (Malhotra, 1995). The major questions and response categories were as follows. With respect to attitudes towards foreign language respondents were asked about the level of importance that staff attached to foreign language skill and were offered four response categories ranging from little to great importance. They were then asked about the extent to which they believed language proficiency leads to greater export success using a four point scale ranging from little to great extent. This was followed by an open invitation to say why this might be so and an open question on the importance of languages in generating more favourable responses from customers.

To complete the questions on attitudes towards languages respondents were asked if their partners spoke to their overseas associates in their native language and about the impact this had on them as exporters. This was followed by an open question on the impact of language skill on business relationships and an invitations to answer yes or no to five statements on the impact of language capability. Finally, respondents were asked about the strength of their agreement (strongly agree to strongly disagree) with the statement: "It is better to negotiate complex issues in your own language unless you are fluent in the foreign language".

Turning to the use of languages respondents were asked if business was normally conducted in a foreign language, English or both and asked about the percentage of their staff who carried out business in a foreign language. They were then asked how frequently (always, often, sometimes, rarely, never) they communicated in a foreign language when using a range of written and verbal media. Respondents were next presented with six statements describing language proficiency levels and asked to say how many of their staff were to be found in each category. They were also asked to place themselves in one of the categories. Finally the sample were asked to say which foreign languages were used in printing promotional material.

On training respondents were asked whether staff were offered training in languages and if so, what methods were used. They were then asked if there were plans to expand training. If the response was yes they were asked how they would go about it, if no they were asked why no expansion was planned. The next question referred to cultural awareness. The sample were asked if the cultural differences between their own country and their export country were slight, moderate or major and then asked to explain how any differences manifested themselves. Respondents were then asked to respond to open questions on how they became aware of differences and how awareness of differences impacted on the exporting process. Finally, respondents were asked to say how, in the absence of language proficiency, they conducted their overseas business.

Results and Discussion

Exporting firms in this sample tend to be well established and relatively large, that is sixteen of the sample employ more than 50 people and thirteen employ more than 200. Sixteen firms have been exporting for more than 10 years and exports account for a large proportion of total sales. In two firms exports account for less than 25% of sales, in 5 others they account for between 25 and 50% and in the remaining 13 exports make up more than 50% of sales.

Once overseas trade is started by a firm there seems to be a tendency to seek out several markets. In this study seventeen of the sample export to five or more countries, thirteen export to ten or more, and eleven sell to fifteen or more nations. Destinations are world-wide. An examination of the job titles of the 20 interviewees shows that the management responsibilities for exporting are varied. Five people have titles with the prefix "Shipping", for example Shipping Controller; four are Managing Directors or equivalent, four are Marketing Managers, three are Export Managers while the remainder are called (a) Credit Manager, (b) Production Planner, (c) Business Development Manager and (d) Sales and Transport Manager.

When questioned on the importance that export staff generally attach to foreign languages no interviewee said that their staff normally attach great important to language skills. However, five people replied that staff generally attach considerable importance, six stated that they attach some importance and nine said that staff attach little importance to languages. Interviewees were questioned as to whether or not they believed that their firm would be more successful if their export staff could communicate more proficiently in foreign languages. In response sixteen said their firm would be more successful: fourteen respondents agreed that it would help to some extent, one to a considerable extent and one other to a great extent. Of the remaining four companies, three believed language talent would make little difference and one felt that the question was not applicable to his organisation.

Upon further probing of responses to the previous questions three categories of answers emerged. When asked why foreign language skills would assist exporting success five of respondents stated that "English is the international business language" and hence foreign language skills were not important. Some of their comments were as follows: "You can't speak every language"; "All new markets are explored in English"; "Most of our marketing is done through foreign nationals"; "Foreign languages wouldn't assist exporting ... English is *the* business language"

However, six believed that language skills can improve the chances of breaking into new markets and gave the following reasons: "Foreign language skills would open new markets to us, especially in Francophone countries"; "They are beneficial for the initial exploration of markets"; "They allow us to explore new markets segments"; "Foreign languages would allow us to increase sales". A further nine felt that knowledge of foreign languages helps improve communication and relationships between all parties concerned, as the following statements illustrate: "Language capabilities would allow us to do business more efficiently"; "Languages procure better discussions and more responsive customers"; "They promote better communication and personal relationships".

When asked whether or not foreign languages are seen as important for business people, most respondents did agree that they were. Examples of some of the ways in which languages were considered important are: "Language skills vastly improve communications, discussions and impress your clients as they see your commitment to their country"; "You are in a position to negotiate complex issues"; "They enhance your confidence as you are on an equal footing"; "Languages allow you to recognise opportunities ... you do not exclude yourself"; "They increase your prestige and you know what you are agreeing to"; "Lets you get closer to the customer"; "Language capability helps build relationships - you have taken the time to learn their language"; "You are treated with more courtesy"; "Not to speak your customers' language is arrogance".

When questioned directly as to whether or not their foreign customers react more favourable to them when they speak the appropriate foreign language sixteen of the interviewees said yes. Of the remainder, two answered no, qualifying this by explaining that their export partners are prepared to speak English, the other two did not know how their foreign customers reacted. In further questioning about the international communication process interviewees were asked if their foreign clients ever deliberately spoke amongst themselves in their own language, knowing that the Northern Ireland exporters could not understand them. In response fifteen of the respondents agreed that this did happen, some saying that it is a universal practice, indeed it was suggested that Koreans use "asides" to deliberately disconcert. Three respondents said that this never happens, one person saying that "we are open and think that they are too". The remaining two could not say whether this happened at their meetings.

The exporters were then asked if knowledge of their foreign customers' language would help them to establish a closer working relationship. In reply one person said no, arguing that languages are not a factor in this equation. However, two individuals said that languages would "probably" help, while seventeen were convinced that they would. Of those who felt that languages help a lot some of their comments are: "Language knowledge allows us to understand their needs"; "Languages allow us to get closer to them - formally and personally"; "They improve communication and business relations"; "Assuming that they speak English implies that you believe yourself to be superior to them".

Interviewees were next presented with a list of statements about foreign language capability, displayed in Table one, and asked for their response in yes/no format. It is clear from the table that respondents feel that foreign language capability can confer considerable advantages on exporters. It can improve communication, develop trust and afford a psychological advantage.

Table 1: Response to questions on the attraction of foreign language capability.

Do you believe that foreign language capability:	*Yes*	*No*
Shows an interest in the culture of the customers' country?	17	3
Allows a relationship of trust to develop?	17	3
Improves the flow of communication both to and from the market?	17	3
Improves ability to negotiate and adapt products or services to meet the specific needs of the customer?	18	2
Gives a psychological advantage in selling?	18	2

Attitudes are generally in favour of language proficiency but in the literature there was a suggestion that "it is better to negotiate complex issues in your own language unless you are fluent in the foreign language". When presented with this statement the vast majority of respondents either strongly agreed (thirteen) or agreed (six), with only one dissenting voice. In qualifying their agreement some respondents ventured that most negotiation are held in English and that contracts are usually presented in English until an appropriate translation is available. However, other respondents said that the use of foreign languages or English depends on the circumstances.

To summarise, this section has been concerned principally with attitudes towards the use of foreign languages for exporting and results are quite clear. On all questions between 75% and 100% of the sample agreed that foreign languages are important for export purposes and general business activities. The sample believe that foreign languages have the potential to play a key role in maximising export success. This being the case let us discover what happens in practice.

Use of and proficiency in foreign languages

Attitudes favour the use of languages but when asked about the language in which exporting is normally done eleven of our firms report that English is the norm, eight say that a combination of foreign language and English is used while only one firm uses foreign languages exclusively. Furthermore, when questioned about the percentage of employees who communicate regularly in the language of export partners six of firms report that no employees do so, nine say that between one and four per cent do, and five tell us that the percentage is between five and ten per cent. For many of these experienced exporters English is the only language ever used. Even in the fourteen businesses which do communicate in foreign languages the percentage of staff with language proficiency only ranges from one per cent to nine per cent.

The firms were next asked about the frequency with which foreign languages are employed using different media. It could be, for example, that English is used more often in the spoken than in the written word. Results in Table 2 indicate that languages are used a little more often when communicating by letter or fax but the differences between the written and verbal frequencies are small. The fact that six firms of the sample never use languages, no matter what means of communication is used, lends support for the observation above that a significant minority of our sample do almost all of their overseas business in English.

Table 2: Percentage of respondents who use foreign languages with given frequencies in different modes of communication.

			Frequencies		
Mode	*Always*	*Often*	*Sometimes*	*Rarely*	*Never*
Face-to-face	-	30	30	10	30
Telephone	-	35	20	15	30
Letter	10	20	20	20	30
Fax	10	30	15	15	30

Turning to the language proficiency of those staff involved with exporting we found that ten firms have a small core of staff (between one per cent and five per cent of personnel) who are fluent or very fluent, five firms have a minority of people (seven to eight per cent of exporting staff) who can communicate quite well in spite of making some mistakes, and nine firms have a group of personnel (approximately ten percent) who can communicate using the basics or using a few foreign words. These results show that while a minority of export staff are proficient to various degrees there is no widespread mastery of languages. However, there are only a small number of staff in an export oriented firm who have direct contact with overseas personnel and a small core of linguists may be all that is needed for reasonable success.

Two further questions were asked in connection with language ability. First, as a matter of interest, interviewees were asked about their own language proficiency. Ten respondents can conduct their business in a foreign language with two being very fluent, two being effective communicators, four make mistakes but still communicate well and two have sufficient language skills for simple purposes. The remaining ten have no foreign language competence or only use a few words and common phrases. Therefore, it can be said that half of the interviewees can communicate effectively in a foreign language and this is a higher proportion than the rest of the staff involved in exporting. However, given their managerial positions this is hardly surprising.

Finally, respondents were asked if brochures and other promotional material were printed in foreign languages and fourteen said yes. The most frequently used languages are French, German and Spanish, while two firms print brochures in multiple languages in line with their export markets. Other languages in which literature is produced are: Chinese, Dutch, Italian, Japanese and Portuguese.

Overall, the degree of language proficiency was rather basic but some firms did display greater competence. It was thought that certain export markets might have a stronger requirement for languages than others but a review of markets alongside proficiencies did not yield any clear association. However, and with due regard to the size of the sample, there was a discernible link between organisational size and proficiency. In reality larger organisations can support language professionals more easily than smaller ventures.

In summary it can be stated that just less than half of the sample regularly use languages in their exporting activities and that those firms which do so generally have a significant minority of people who can do some business in this way. A small number of firms use languages occasionally but six companies never use a foreign language. Firms are a little more active when using the written word and a large majority print their brochures in foreign languages.

Training in foreign languages

Exporters were asked next about their staff training for foreign languages. Initially they were asked as to whether or not they actively encouraged their staff to learn a foreign language. In response only eight said that their staff were encouraged to learn any international languages. Those who supported training were asked "How are staff trained?" and various methods were highlighted. Four respondents said that they send staff on external courses, such as "Ex Lingua", a further four run intensive in-house courses, two offer financial assistance to individual employees, one company learns from videos and CDs, one firm sends employees to foreign subsidiaries, whilst a further one encourages staff to travel.

When questioned as to whether or not their company intends to expand its knowledge of foreign languages seventeen businesses affirmed that their company's language base was to be extended and suggested the following means of meeting this objective: "We will make courses available in-house"; "We will bring in more graduates"; "New staff [will be] employed to cover every European language"; "We encourage eagerness to speak languages"; "We will expand our expertise in French and Spanish"; "If we continue in our existing markets, we will definitely send our staff abroad".

Of those who said that their company does not intend to expand its knowledge of foreign languages the following comments were made: "When a need arises we do employ professional linguists"; "We may expand our language capabilities in the future"; "We need to debate this issue at board level in order to decide future strategy".

In summary, it can be seen that despite the favourable attitudes of these firms towards using foreign languages and the restricted use of languages in practice only eight ventures actively encourage their staff to learn foreign languages. Nevertheless, thirteen of those interviewed were able to suggest various ways in which they could train their staff if the need arose. However, when training staff exporters must be aware that the language taught must be suitably technical and applicable to the target market; there is little use in training staff in how to communicate socially if they cannot discuss the business at hand in the appropriate language.

Regarding future language training, nine firms affirmed that their company would be extending its language capabilities in the future, eight did not envisage, at the time of interview, that their staff would learn more languages. The remaining three businesses could not say what would happen in the future. Hence training in foreign languages is not a key component of the search for export markets by these businesses.

Foreign culture and exporting

On this matter the exporters were asked whether they were aware of any cultural differences between their country and the countries with which they trade. Fourteen interviewees stated that they were aware of cultural differences. Those who noticed cultural variations were asked if they could rate them as slight, some or major differences and replies were as follows:

- Slight differences: 6 - Europe, Germany. Depends on market
- Some differences: 5 - European countries
- Major differences: 5 - Korea/China; 9 France; 3 Thailand/Middle East

However, as many as six firms were not aware of any cultural differences when dealing with their export partners.

Upon further probing of the cultural dimension, the following examples of ways in which these Irish firms perceived differences when conducting international business relationships were offered:

- *Pacific Rim:* In Thailand the people are very proud. Generally in this area your partner must never "lose-face". You must take you time to understand your clients and their ways. You must respect religious mores and holidays. When doing business one should follow their example
- *Spain:* The Spanish are easy going but sexist, they will not do business with females
- *Germany:* Misunderstanding in communications were considered to be common place. In addition, Germans are more formal, with a stronger work ethic
- *Hong Kong*: One must never use Christian names in Hong Kong when doing business

In general the sample seemed unable or unwilling to highlight specific ways in which culture impacts on business practice.

Culture impacts upon the ease with which personal relationships may be developed and exporters must keep alert and be aware of attitudes to relationships in other countries. The general consensus of the sample was that if one can get along personally with a counterpart it builds confidence. One must be both cautions and adaptable. If you can relate to your customers and are courteous business problems can be overcome.

When the exporters were questioned about how they became aware of cultural differences a variety of responses were given. Seven said that they found out about cultural differences through reading journals, trade magazines or government publications. A further seven said they had practical business experience or had lived in the other countries. Discussions with contacts who do business in the different regions was cited by four respondents. Other information came from market research, sales agents, sales staff, foreign contacts and subsidiaries, and from overseas Trade Missions.

To summarise, fourteen firms were aware of cultural differences when dealing with their export partners, with Pacific Rim countries regarded as being very different from Ireland. However, respondents were divided on the impact of cultural variations in Europe - some considering that they were slight, but other found major differences. Results in this section are similar to those reported in connection with the impact of language proficiency on export performance. The sample are generally aware of the importance of cultural appreciation for market analyses and effective business relationships and believe that cultural knowledge is important for exporting success but their inability, or reluctance, to give specific examples of cultural differences, and their impact suggests that in practice they do not afford the matter the attention it deserves. Given that culture influences relationships and market understanding inattention to these matters will mean that inevitable exporting problems remain unsolved.

Exporting without foreign languages

To conclude the questionnaire respondents were asked how they manage to do business if they do not understand their foreign customers' language. Every company responded to this question and eight said that they communicate via interpreters or translation agencies. Five firms stated that their overseas partners employ locals who speak English, or that they do business through their own wholly owned subsidiaries which employ foreign personnel. Four firms use either independent distributors or agents, while 14% use locals, expatriate British staff or British Embassies. The remaining three said "we struggle".

It can be seen, therefore, that most of the sample employ some alternative method of communicating with foreign clients. However, as highlighted in the literature review the use of intermediaries may present serious drawbacks. Personal and market "closeness" between export partners is almost impossible; interpreters may not respect confidentiality; cultural factors may be ignored or misinterpreted; and messages may be communicated incorrectly. Therefore, it might be sensible for the exporters to attempt to gain personal knowledge of the language and culture of their foreign partners, in order to maximise potential.

Conclusion

It has been suggested recently that exporting offers the only real potential for growth for the Northern Ireland economy. Although exporting is a complex process with many factors leading to success it has been claimed that one important element for success is a working knowledge of the language of one's export partner plus an awareness of the culture within the target export market (Swift, 1991).

Results for this study indicate that most interviewees consider foreign languages to be important for export purposes and general business activities. They state that foreign languages have the potential to play a part in maximising export success; indeed some think that languages are vital for export success. However, when questioned on the actual use of foreign languages results do not correspond with opinions regarding the importance of foreign languages. Six firms never use foreign languages for export purposes, four use them only occasionally, while ten do use some foreign languages when exporting. However, even in those companies which use foreign languages regularly, only a few key export staff are able to communicate effectively in the language of their export partners.

Hence the reality of the situation is that many exporters do not actually possess significant language skills. Despite this, fourteen of the interviewees claimed to be satisfied with their staff's foreign language capabilities. Furthermore, despite the lack of fluent linguists, only nine of the sample offer foreign language training. Hence training in foreign languages is not a key component of training for export personnel. When faced with problems in communication which this situation engenders most of the sample employ some alternative method of communicating with foreign clients. They use, for example, interpreters, local employees who speak English, agents or expatriates.

Another important consideration when exporting is an appreciation of foreign culture. A significant majority (70%) of the sample are aware, to some extent, of cultural differences when dealing with their export partners and believe that knowledge about differences is largely gleaned from researching the export markets, using personal contacts and making visits.

In summary, many Northern Ireland exporters believe that a knowledge of foreign languages and culture is important for exporting success. However, in reality foreign languages are not used to any significant extent to explore markets or truly understand behavioural norms overseas. Furthermore, training in foreign language skills and an awareness of cultural norms are not given a high priority, amongst those exporters interviewed. This research has been conducted from the point of view of exporters but it would be interesting to discover how overseas buyers view language skill. A useful extension to this research would be to discover what impact a seller with language skill has on their decision to buy. Relationship marketing models emphasise the importance of building an effective relationship with clients and it would be interesting to discover if language proficiency improves relationship building.

Generally and in keeping with the literature on this topic (Swift, 1991) it is suggested that Northern Ireland companies would be more successful in their export activities if they were more proficient in foreign languages and better aware of the cultural differences in those markets to which they export. Language ability is a tool for facilitating greater ease of exporting, for broadening exporters' horizons and enhancing their acceptability to potential export clients. However, it should be noted that companies must also be proficient in the business of exporting itself. The balance is neatly summarised by AGCAS (1994): "Fluency in foreign languages can be an enormous advantage if you are trying to sell goods or services abroad, but personality and business acumen are even more important than a knowledge of foreign languages. Flair without languages is useful; languages without flair are useless".

References

AGCAS (1994), *Using Languages*, Manchester: CSU (Publications) Ltd

Arjona E (1978), "Intercultural Communication and the Training of Interpreters at the Monetery Institute of Foreign Affairs", *Proceedings of the NATO Symposium on Language Interpretation*, 1 October 1977, New York: Plenum Press

Bake T, Walker DM and Walker T (1995), *Doing Business Internationally*, Birr Ridge, ILL: Irwin

Batchelor B (1988), "Putting your mouth where your money is", *Financial Times*, 8 November

Bell J (1995), *International Marketing workbook*, Jordanstown: University of Ulster

Cadbury A (1987), "Do World-Wide Brands Mean a World-Wide Language?", *The Linguist*, Volume 2, Number 2

Clarke W (1991), "The exporting activities of small firms in Northern Ireland", *IBAR - Irish Business and Administrative Research*, Volume 12

Cunningham MT (1982), "Barriers to Organisational Interaction" in Hakansson H (Ed.), *International Marketing and Purchasing of Industrial Goods*, Chichester: John Wiley & Sons

Diamantopolous A, Schlegelmilch BB and Katy TSE KY (1993), "Understanding the Role of Export Marketing Assistance: Empirical Evidence and Research Needs", *European Journal of Marketing*, Volume 27, Number 4

Dichtl E (1990), "International orientation as a pre-condition for export success", *Journal of International Business Studies*, Volume 21, Number 1

Edwards E (1990), "The countess no longer loses her chopsticks", *Financial Times*, 12 January

Enderwick P and Arkoorie ME (1994), "Employment of foreign language specialists and export success in New Zealand", *International Marketing Review (UK)*, Volume 11, Number 4

Ford D (1989), "One more time, what buyer-seller relationships are all about", *Proceedings of the 5th IMP Conference*, Pennsylvania State University, Ohio, 7 September

Glees A (1986), "Looking into Europe", *The Linguist*, Volume 25, Number 4

Graham C (1987), "Industry and Foreign Languages: A Study of IC (Language and Communication Services) Limited", undertaken for the *DES, Ref. (3615/87) Dd 8111684 12/87 C 30 9462 10170 HMSO*, London

Graham J and Herberger RA (1983), "Negotiators abroad don't shoot from the hip", July-August

Gruber U (1976), "A new approach to translation", *Handbook on International Direct Marketing*, Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill

Harvey-Jones J (1988), *Making it happen: Reflections on leadership*, London: Fontana Paperback Limited

Hendricks J (1992), "Multi-cultural European approach to document management", *IMC Journal (USA)*, Nov/Dec

Hill Samuel Bank Limited (1989), *Mergers, Acquisitions and Alternative Corporate Strategies*, London: Mercury Books

Holden NJ (1989), *Market closeness and speaking the language of the customer*, paper presented to 5th IMP Conference, Pennsylvania State University, Ohio, 7 September

Humphreys J (1990), *Doing Business in France*, London: BBC Video package

Kellaway L (1993), "Language Lessons", *Financial Times*, 23 August

Malhotra NK (1995), *Marketing Research: An Applied Orientation*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall International Editions

McAleese D and Gallagher M (1991), Developments in Irish Trade During the 1980s, *Irish Banking Review*, Autumn

Miles L (1993), "An Englishman abroad", *Marketing Business (UK)*, March, Number 18

Pugh DS and Hickson DJ (1995), *Management Worldwide*, London: Penguin

Quinn J (1996), "Don't babel, make profit", *Belfast News Letter*, 6 February

Shipman A (1992), "Talking the same languages", *International Management*, June

Sims BR and Guice S (1992), "Business letters from native, and non-native speakers of English", *The Journal of Business Communication*, Winter

Sussman L and Johnson DM (1993), "The interpreted executive", *Journal of Business Communication*, October

Swift JS (1991), "Foreign Language Ability and International Marketing", *European Journal of Marketing*, Volume 25, Number 12

Turnball PW and Cunningham MT (1981), *International Marketing and Purchasing: A Survey Among Marketing and Purchasing Executives in Five European Countries*, London: Macmillan Press

Tylee J (1991), "How to waste a third of your ad budget", *Campaign*, 29 August

Wickland N (1992), "Getting to know Europe", *Admap*, May

Willmer MAP and Holden NJ (1983), "Language and Related Barriers to Effective Marketing in Non-English Speaking Countries Outside Western Europe", *Working Paper Series 86*, Manchester: Manchester Business School

Appendix: Companies Interviewed

Company	*Interviewee Position*	*No. of Employees*	*Company Established*	*First Exports*
Short Bros. PLC	Shipping Controller	9,000	1901	1901
Mivan Overseas	Overseas Manager	3,000	1974	1981
FG Wilson (Larne)	Marketing Assistant	1,300	1966	1982
Rotary	Shipping Manager	1,200	1960	1978
Lee Apparel	Traffic Manager	900	1977	1977
European Components Co. Ltd	Production Planner	600	1980	1980
Barbour Campbell Threads	Sales Director	560	1784	1900
Howden Sirocco	Credit Manager	400	1860	1861
Brett Martin	Export Executive	400	1950	1950
Mackie Int'l	Contracts & Shipping Manager	400	1800	1850
Farm Fed Chickens	Sales & Transport Manager	350	1977	1992
RDF Dunmurry	Sales & Marketing Manager	280	1947	1955
Ulster Weavers 1995 (Home Fashions)	Field Sales Manager Europe	200	(HF)	1995

Companies interviewed continued

Company	*Interviewee Position*	*No. of Employees*	*Company Established*	*First Exports*
The Nectar Group	Marketing Manager	150	1984	1985
NIEX Leisure	Factory Manager	150	1993	1994
Munster Simms	Marketing Manager	120	1810	1950
W&G Baird Ltd	Director, Business Develop't	115	1862	1970
Int'l Net & Twine Co.	Managing Director	58	1994	1994
BS Tooling	Managing Director	46	1989	1990
TBF Thompson	Managing Director	33	1978	1978