

European Network for Communication  
Development in Business and Education

EDITED BY  
ROBERT GIBSON

INTERNATIONAL  
COMMUNICATION IN BUSINESS  
THEORY AND PRACTICE

*Communication internationale des affaires. Théorie et pratique. Communication*

*Internationale Kommunikation für die Wirtschaft. Theorie und Praxis*

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**International Communication in Business  
Theory and Practice**

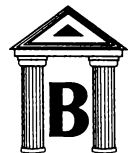
# **European Network for Communication Development in Business and Education**

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## **Preface**

The internationalisation of business is creating new needs for effective communication across language and cultural barriers. This, in turn, is leading to research into what this means, as well as work on developing strategies to meet the needs and overcome the barriers.

This collection of articles by contributors working in 13 European countries offers snapshot views of the vital issues facing managers, researchers and educationalists in this field. Part One focuses on the needs of business, with reports on research on key areas like international recruitment, as well as a personal view of the implications of the foreign assignment. Part Two shows how leading business schools in Europe are responding to the challenges of preparing their students for a role on the global stage by adopting appropriate structures, curricula and methodologies, including the use of multi-media. Part Three examines intercultural communication and language issues arising from the internationalisation of business; culture-general themes like the service encounter and hypercorrection, as well as examples from the interface between specific languages and cultures in Western, Central and Eastern Europe and beyond are covered.

The contributions are selected from papers held at the 10th conference of ENCoDe (European Network of Communication Development in Business and Education) held at the Department of Business Administration in Ingolstadt of the Catholic University of Eichstätt in Germany from 12 – 15 March 1998.

Special thanks go to ENCoDe, the contributors to the conference, the staff and students of the University of Eichstätt for their invaluable support, and Reinhold Denz for preparing the manuscript for publication.

Robert Gibson



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# **Part 1**

## **The Business Perspective**



# **International communication in business: a business perspective**

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The internationalisation of companies has accelerated over the last decade with the need to increase competitiveness and mobility within the global marketplace. This tendency has led many European companies, particularly in the small and medium-sized sector, to recognise the need to improve their linguistic and intercultural capability. It is apparent from a series of studies on business communication undertaken in the 90s that, while there has been a growing awareness of the economic impact of language and cultural barriers, there is significantly less evidence of companies implementing consciously developed language strategies as part of their export plan. This paper, firstly, reviews international business environment and, in particular, investigates the inter-relationship between the language factor and export performance; and, secondly, reviews evidence from recent studies of European SMEs which suggest a link between a language strategy and improved export performance.

## **The international business environment**

The international trading environment is one of rapid, continuous change leading to increasing cross-cultural contact and an ever greater need for cross-cultural communication. Most European companies are increasingly involved in some form of international partnership – whether it be from acquisitions, mergers, joint ventures, strategic alliances, international projects, or simply buying or selling through agents abroad – which often involves everyday communication. For example, the value of UK companies taken over in cross-border acquisitions is now the highest in Europe and totalled 30.4 billion ECUs in 1996. The country with the next highest level of acquisition is France, where companies worth 14 bill. ECUs – less than half the value of the British – were taken over in the same year.

Many large manufacturing companies have been active global players for some time: SGS Thompson, for example, the Italian-French semi-conductor manufacturer, has switched all its labour-intensive production to Asia from Europe in order to reduce the cost of labour and keep the factory open all round

the clock. Siemens has opened a major manufacturing plant in North East England where labour costs are lower than Germany.

The service industry has similarly been affected: people living in Stockport, England, now have their refuse collected by a French-owned company, while residents of Newcastle upon Tyne receive drinking water managed by the French company, *Lyonnaise des Eaux*.

Many of the larger companies have recognised the need for action. In their study 'Skills for Graduates in the 21st Century', the 500-member Association of Graduate Recruiters confirmed that globalisation of organisations was 'leading to a growing need for managers with international skills as well as mobility'. Moreover, the Harvard/Amrop International survey of nearly 1000 senior executives world-wide show that 94% feel that the development of international executives is of 'vital future importance' to their company. 'Early identification and development of global executives is the only way we're going to be able to compete in the future'.

The position is becoming more critical for smaller companies (SMEs) which have global ambitions that they are unable to fulfil since they do not always possess the people with the right communication and marketing skills, or the material resources, to expand into new markets. The variety of potential interfaces with export partners has expanded beyond recognition: it can now involve managing local workforces; tendering for projects in any part of the world (in any language); setting up websites for e-commerce in a range of languages or communicating the same message across borders in different languages and cultures by a variety of media within the same working organisation.

### **Export performance and the language factor**

Before the *Elucidate* survey of the communication needs of European SMEs (Hagen, 1998), there has been an emerging body of knowledge from various sources, which indicate that appropriate use of the customer's language and/or knowledge of the local culture is a critical factor in determining export performance in certain foreign markets (Schegelmilch & Ross, 1987; Bjarnarson, 1992; Weiss, 1992; Castro, 1992; Dicht et al., 1990, Hagen, 1993). What remains unclear is the exact correlation between the use of a foreign language as an independent variable and company export success as measured through dependent variables such as company profile (sector, size, market orientation, trading experience, turnover etc.) and subject variables such as

managerial attitude and background (behavioural characteristics, level of education, age etc.).

What is clear is that there is a complex chemistry of critical success factors involved in effective exporting. At one end of the spectrum, success may be due to the quality or uniqueness of the product – as the Japanese showed with their electronic products in the 70s and 80s. At the other end, success in a competitive market can also depend on a series of more intangible factors, i.e. creating a good rapport in addition to givens, such as product acceptability and delivery time. As competitiveness increases in a global market, it is inevitable that there will be a move towards the second with greater emphasis on controlling the intangibles.

Not unsurprisingly the linguistic map of Europe shows a strong degree of variation across different countries. Although any survey which relies upon self-reporting can be flawed (since you depend not only on the integrity of the respondent, but also assume they employ the same terminology, such as ‘fluency’), they do, nonetheless, provide a yardstick for comparisons. In the December 1996 *Expolangues* survey of 5000 Europeans aged 15 and over, an average of 51% of Europeans declared they were capable of speaking at least one other foreign language. The French and Italians head the league with 61% and 56% respectively. Then come the Germans with 49%, followed by the British and the Spanish with 44% and 43% respectively. In terms of *fluency in another language* the British are at the bottom of the league: 14% of respondents claimed to speak another language *fluently* (the average for Europe is 26%).

In this very approximate ‘broadbrush’ picture there are, however, three noteworthy findings: (i) Age distribution is a significant factor: amongst the under 35s the average number of Europeans claiming to speak another language fluently rises from 26% to 37%; (ii) Level of competence: The discrepancy between those claiming to be ‘able to communicate’ as opposed to being ‘fluent’ is marked. In the UK, for example, 26% consider themselves able to communicate in French, whereas only 12% think they are ‘fluent’; (iii) English is the most widely spoken foreign language (excluding native speakers) but not the unquestioned lingua franca in practice where a range of second languages are known: English 52%, French 39%, German 35%, Italian 26%, Spanish 23%, Portuguese 3%, Dutch 1% and Greek 1%.

The existence of a multilingual Business Europe dominated by several languages, where English is *prima inter pares*, is also borne out by the findings