



BASIC INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS

get the small things right to make a big difference

Foreword

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Strong communication skills, including language and cultural skills, are a key ingredient of export success. To assist local companies to export successfully, UK Trade & Investment has developed a range of export support services under the “Passport to Export” umbrella.

The scheme offers a range of export solutions from workshops to prepare your company for export through to sector-specific advice and market research, market visits and dedicated in-country support. These support measures have all been tailored to help local companies enter export markets for the first time or expand their activities in new markets.

This short guide has been developed by UK Trade & Investment, in association with the Regional Language Network, to help companies prepare for international trade by using effective language and communication skills. As the nature of manufacturing industry continues to change, and more knowledge-based companies develop, there is a need for companies to develop an international outlook. Trading in an international marketplace means particular attention must be paid to cultural issues, languages and basic international communications. We hope this guide will be a starting point to help you to address these issues.

We look forward to working with you through “Passport to Export” and wish you luck in your preparations for selling in export markets.

FOREWORD

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Introduction

The growth of international trade and travel brings new opportunities to business, the professions and public bodies. However it also presents the challenge of language, culture and communication. For many people who stopped learning languages at school and have not been involved since then, the prospect of learning another language is quite daunting.

It takes hard work to reach a good standard and then there is the challenge of maintaining that level of proficiency. If you travel infrequently or to various different countries it is difficult to decide which language to learn and what level is appropriate. Certainly there will be circumstances where English must suffice and obviously it will have to while some foreign language skills are being acquired.

However in export communications we cannot afford to ignore the language and culture of our customers - that may carry a high cost - and we must communicate effectively. Our contact with the multi-lingual world will be much more effective if we add some basic international communication skills to our English proficiency. The result is better communications, improved business relationships, new business opportunities, greater confidence in business communications and ultimately greater success in export markets.

This booklet provides an introduction to basic international communication and additional skills that can be acquired relatively easily, making a considerable improvement in our ability to communicate with international colleagues and customers.

Other titles in this series are:

- **Foreign language training**
- **Adapting materials for international markets**
- **Commissioning interpreting services**
- **Intercultural skills**
- **Recruiting people with languages**

For details of how to obtain these booklets, please see the Where to go next section at the end of this booklet.

INTRODUCTION

Intercultural Skills

Case study

Pressac – sensitivity to customers’ cultures
Pressac Communications Limited is a world-wide supplier of electrical, electronic and connector assemblies to the automotive and telecommunications markets. Based in Bilborough, Nottingham, its main export sales come from the Middle East, a market where it places particular emphasis on the importance of understanding customers’ cultures and values.

“While business in Middle Eastern markets is mainly done in English, we always take care to train our staff in cultural awareness before they travel to the region to represent the firm,” says Rita Rawson, Sales Office Supervisor. At a basic level, this involves staff understanding the dos and don’ts of conducting business in these countries; the firm has found that a little appreciation of local culture and customs can go a long way.

Having travelled there herself, she is aware of differing attitudes towards the role of women in business in some Arab countries. “I’m always careful to ascertain early on the other party’s stance on dealing with women,” says Rita.

“If Arab businessmen do seem reluctant to deal with me directly, I can always take the decision to work through a middle man.”

There are subtle differences in body language and less subtle differences in gestures from one country to

another as well as variations in protocol, etiquette and dress code. We draw conclusions about anything from social position to trustworthiness from these traits within our own society. However, when we apply the same judgements to someone from a different country we can be completely wrong. We can also send confusing messages if our foreign contacts make similar culturally-bound judgements about us.

Adapting to a different culture requires open eyes to see differences and an open mind to avoid the misjudgements that come from a cultural bias. Of course we have to assess the people that we work with but we need to make sure that this assessment is based on a good understanding of the local culture. Adapting to different cultures requires advice, observation and empathy. Advice can be obtained from a consultant or trainer who can be selected from BLIS Professionals, a quality assured database, or from information providers such as UK Trade & Investment, or from trade directories.

Cultural Briefings

The Regional Language Network has produced a set of cultural briefings, giving a basic introduction to the culture of the countries they cover. They include basic phrases in the local language, practical tips on business etiquette and information on the history, people and social customs. Countries covered include Cyprus, India, China, UAE, and ten Central European countries.

The RLN cultural briefings can be downloaded free

from their website – see the *'Where to go next'* section at the end of this booklet.

Names

'They spell it Vinci and pronounce it Vinchy; foreigners always spell better than they pronounce'.

Mark Twain: *Innocents Abroad*.

In other countries we are surrounded by the local language. We hear the names of people, companies, towns, streets, food and drinks - and we will have to use them. Learning how to pronounce the language ensures that we are accurate and professional. Pronouncing the names of colleagues and customers correctly is a courtesy which contributes to good relationships and enhances our status. It is also worth sharing this knowledge with colleagues, particularly front-line staff, so that they can pronounce and spell the names of visitors or callers.

Getting place names right helps us to find our way around, yet place names are notorious examples of English speakers' inability to listen - in German, Munich is München, just as Cologne is in fact Köln and, elsewhere, the Danube is actually the Donau. Once we know how to pronounce the language we avoid these traps and can travel more confidently.

In most languages other than English the rules of pronunciation and stress patterns are strictly applied (no other language has four variants on one group of letters - cough, rough, bough and through) - so we

probably face an easier task than someone learning English. We can learn how to pronounce other languages and really benefit from this skill when we travel and when we work with foreign colleagues.

Spellings & Alphabets

Words are sounds and these sounds sometimes have a common root or origin or may be the same word with a slight variation in pronunciation. When we learn how these sounds are represented in written form in a different language we can start to understand notices, menus and many other sources of information.

We can also find words that sound similar or close to the English word and have the same or roughly similar meaning. For example, the Russian word spelt pectopah (in the Cyrillic alphabet) sounds like rye-sta-ran; in other words (eg. French or English) it means restaurant. Learning an alphabet such as Cyrillic helps us to relate the names on our street map to the letters on the street signs. This alphabet is similar to Greek and is in use in many Slav countries.

Acronyms will be different in other languages: SME (small and medium sized enterprises) is PME (petites et moyennes enterprises) in French and PYME (pequeñas y medianas empresas) in Spanish. It is always better to use full titles rather than acronyms or abbreviations.

Case study

Northampton-based Bambino Mio is a specialist producer of cotton nappies and associated products. Around half of its sales are to countries outside the United Kingdom, and doing business in languages other than English is an essential part of the company's drive to increase its sales overseas. Most sales are to continental Europe, and Bambino Mio recognises that as a 'foreign' company in these markets, it needs to communicate with customers and distributors in their own language to sell effectively.

This philosophy underpins all the company's overseas trading. The Bambino Mio e-commerce web site is accessible in fifteen languages and although the cost was significant, the company is serious about establishing itself in these countries and believes that the sales it will generate will more than justify the cost. In addition to the web site, all the firm's literature and packaging, as well as its promotional video, is produced in the local language of the target market.

Numbers

Numbers may not appear to show much variation, but in fact, there can be significant differences. The numbers with which we are familiar are in use throughout most of the world. However we should remember the European forms of the numbers 1 and 7 when we are working with colleagues overseas who are more familiar with these forms. Perhaps more important is the decimal point which

appears as a full stop in some countries and as a comma in others. Thousands are delineated by a full stop in many European countries, so that 10.000 is ten thousand rather than ten to three decimal places - a big difference if we are talking Euros!

As the French for thousand is mille we need to watch out for milliard, which is one thousand million. This, of course, is the same as an American billion which is considerably smaller than a British billion of one million million.

Although the British or Imperial system of weights and measures was phased out in favour of the metric system thirty years ago, it still survives in everyday speech. It also survives in the USA but confusingly, often represents different quantities or amounts. Clothing and shoe sizes present some problems despite some enlightened retailers displaying all sizes on their labels. Making a note of your own or family sizes in the European and American systems is useful if your trip includes some retail therapy!

Dates given in American form of Month, Day, Year can be confusing if you expect the more logical sequence of Day, Month, Year. This is particularly difficult for the first twelve days of the month: does 12-09 mean 12th September or December 9th?

There are many different numbering systems for example Arabic and European. Both are derived from earlier Hindu numerals spread by merchants and traders.

The Roman calendar is in use throughout much of the world; however, it is not the only one. There are

Chinese, Muslim, Indian and other calendars in use. They all start at different times of the year but are of the same length in days. We, of course, have a calendar year starting in January, a financial year starting in April and an academic year commencing in September. It is essential to define which is meant, particularly when we are working across cultures. Finally, we should remember that speaking numbers requires some consideration. When we say the letter o and mean 0 (nought, zero, nil), we can cause confusion. We give telephone numbers in groups of three whereas French speakers use pairs of numbers. We also need to choose between listing numbers as if we are spelling or as if we are giving a value; eg three six five or three hundred and sixty five.

Interpreting

Not all of the contacts that we make will have sufficient English to communicate with us or to understand what we are saying and an interpreter will be needed. A basic understanding of the interpreting process is essential if we are going to communicate effectively.

There are various forms of interpreting.

- Liaison interpreting between two or three people in conversation.
- Consecutive interpreting of a speech or formal address.
- Whispered interpreting where only one or two people in the audience speak a different language.
- Simultaneous interpreting using radio microphones and headsets.
- Telephone interpreting where the caller speaks a different language to the recipient.

Top tips for trouble free interpreting

To ensure the best service it is essential to employ an interpreter with appropriate experience, to define what is required, to provide advance information such as the background to the task and a glossary of technical terms if the vocabulary in use is particularly specialised.

To help the interpreter you should speak clearly and concisely, avoid jargon or dialect and leave breaks for interpretation at sensible intervals.

Translation

'The lift is being fixed for the next day. During that time we regret that you will be unbearable'.

We have all seen menus, hotel brochures and notices in English that make little or no sense and are often amusing. These are examples of bad translation and the very last thing you want for your own company or organisation. Poor translation into any language by an inexperienced or unqualified interpreter is frustrating, potentially damaging to our image and a waste of money. An understanding of the translation process is essential.

UNDERSTANDING

Foreign language documents, if they are large or numerous, can be translated for the gist or sense of what they say. Then a decision can be made about the extent of full translation that is required and a translator with appropriate skill and understanding of the sector or technology can be engaged.

Translation into a foreign language can be for a variety of purposes, ranging from short letters or memos to installation and operating instructions or promotional material. These demand different skills and it is very important to choose the right translator and to brief them accurately.

Top tips for effective translations

- Professional translators work only into their native language.
- Technical translations demand a knowledge of the technology.
- Commercial translations require a knowledge of the industry.
- Promotional messages can be culturally based and may need to be adapted or new copy created. This is called localisation.
- Important documents may need 'back translation' into the original language to check accuracy.
- Print proofs should be checked by the translator.

Our guide to translation and localisation provides more detail on this subject. The BLIS Professionals web site also provides a database of translators.

For more information, see the *'Where to go next'* section at the end of this booklet.

Case Study

Same product - different names

A & S Metallurgical Resources supplies consumables to iron, steel and aluminium foundries in the UK as well as overseas. The company's brochures are available in French, German, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish to support the efforts of agents and distributors in those territories.

A & S used a professional and well-established translation agency using native speakers to produce the foreign language versions; they then had these checked by their overseas agents to make sure all the technical terminology had been accurately rendered. This thoroughness paid off when one of the trade names they use alerted the Spanish agent to the fact that it was very close to the Spanish word for 'castrate' – clearly not an appropriate image for their product!

Offshore english

In continental English, the expression 'controlling the formation' means 'checking the training'. This is not incorrect, it is just the vocabulary of a different form of English which is used as a common language.

The English language has spread around the world. It is now used as the official language of many countries, a common language in several very large

countries with hundreds of native languages such as India and Nigeria and a means of communication between citizens of different countries. The English that is used, however, can vary from place to place, and the proficiency of speakers will also vary. When we speak or listen to English outside this country we have to be aware of and adjust to these differences.

Top tips for using English overseas effectively

Speaking 'offshore English' requires concentration. We should:

- Avoid the use of idiom, jargon or dialect expressions.
- Not use abbreviations eg. say statistics rather than stats.

Or specifications in preference to specs.

- Be careful to use full titles rather than acronyms which will differ across languages.
- Use clear concise English.
- Speak more slowly but maintain our natural rhythm and stress pattern.
- Avoid long complicated sentences.
- Maintain eye contact so that the listener can benefit from expression and lip movements.
- Adapt presentations to the audience in advance.
- Use graphics and handouts etc to enhance our communication.
- Not assume that a smile or nod from a foreign colleague means they have understood. They may not wish to reveal misunderstanding or disagreement for cultural reasons.

Listening imposes similar disciplines. We need to:

- Think about the pronunciation of the person's first language.
- Try to ensure that we are face-to-face with the speaker.
- Avoid situations where there is a lot of background noise.
- Build up a vocabulary of offshore English.
- Think laterally when uncertain about meaning.

Basic vocabulary

Just a few words

While it is possible to travel and transact business in many countries through English or one of the other world languages, adding a small vocabulary of the local language is always very worthwhile.

Use of even a small 'Meet and Greet' vocabulary helps to break down barriers and establish good relationships. It shows that we respect the people of the country we are in and that we are serious about building international links.

'Survival' phrases and vocabulary not only make travelling more pleasant but they add to our confidence in a foreign environment.

Learning this amount of language is a relatively small task which can and should be fitted into routine travel preparations.

Learning bite-sized chunks of vocabulary is the best way to progress in language acquisition. Learning

BASIC VOCABULARY

a small selection of key technical words or expressions that are specific to our sector or profession enables us to reach out and find or provide meaning in a discussion.

We also gain the trust and respect of our international colleagues.

Case study

Passing the personality test Iseki Vacuum Systems Limited is based in Daventry, Northants, and designs, manufactures and installs vacuum sewerage systems worldwide. Sales Director Nigel Smith has found that language – even a little of it – can play a big part in developing and cementing long-term relationships.

“With our existing and potential clients speaking so many languages, we have to be realistic,” admits Nigel Smith, Sales Director. “We can’t expect to communicate competently in the customer’s mother tongue in every market in which we operate. But our experience is that a little will go a long way in building good relationships with our clients.”

The company has discovered that in many of the countries where it operates, there is a special emphasis on building up the relationship at a personal level before progress can be made on the business front. It’s what Nigel calls ‘passing the personality test’, and speaking the local language is key to developing these bonds. Nigel has been selling in Hungary for several years and now has an active vocabulary of around 50 words. “It doesn’t sound

much, but in most common social occasions I can find the right words or phrase to use, and customers have been particularly appreciative.”

Language learning

Case study

Languages bringing bottom-line benefits
Based at Ratcliffe-on-Soar, near Nottingham, E.ON Power Technology is an engineering, scientific and technology consultancy that works with energy sector businesses throughout the world.

The team recently secured a £1m contract in Mexico after preparing the entire proposal and documentation in Spanish, and offering a Spanish-speaking project manager. They believe their success in winning this contract was in large part due to making the extra effort necessary to communicate with the client in their first language. To do this, they invested in an intensive Spanish language course for the key project manager. The investment paid dividends: not only did the company win this piece of business, but other contracts have since been offered to them, now that customers know they will go the extra mile for them.

“Learning languages is a key part of understanding culture,” says Managing Director Derrick Farthing. “Our aim is to understand our customers’ needs and respond to them appropriately. Speaking their language is an important step towards achieving this goal.”

Progress on cultural awareness, basic international communication and basic vocabulary makes us much more effective in a multi-cultural and multi-lingual environment. We may choose to progress further and start to learn a language, building on the secure foundation which we have established. There are a wide range of methods which we can select and/or combine to make effective progress.

- Classes in local colleges - day or night classes once or twice a week can provide a good learning environment with group support. It is important to ensure that the level and content are appropriate.
- Immersion courses can provide intensive learning which makes for fast progress. If they are in the country of the target language this reinforces language learning and provides an opportunity to adapt to the culture.
- One-to-one or small group training using a tutor. This is an effective method which offers the possibility of sector, profession or task specific training.
- Distance learning through television, on-line or using CDs and audio tapes.

The key to progress is an accurate assessment of training needs and selection of the appropriate mix of learning methods along with a strong commitment to the task of learning.

International communication strategies

Research has shown that one company in five is losing business due to language and cultural barriers. Only one company in ten has a strategy for international communications, setting out the processes and procedures that enable them to deal with fairly predictable problems.

An audit or review can identify which language and cultural skills already exist within your workforce. You will almost certainly be surprised by some hidden talent. This knowledge will help you match existing skills with business priorities, and identify gaps you can address through additional training, outsourcing or recruitment.

The **UKTI Export Communication Review** provides financial assistance for an audit. An independent export communications consultant will visit your company and examine specifically the way you tackle the language and cultural issues that arise. The Review also includes a tailored report, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of your company's current communications, considering written, verbal, personal, promotional and electronic interactions.

The report will help you determine:

- How incoming and foreign correspondence should be processed.
- How foreign language information should be sourced and processed.

STRATEGIES

- What company literature should be translated (promotional material, installation and safety instructions, packaging etc) and how to set up quality controlled procedures to do this.
- What access is needed to interpreting services for conferences, meetings and other events.
- How the company website can be localised.
- What intercultural, basic international communication and language training is required, for which members of staff and to what level.
- Whether it would be necessary to recruit staff with language skills or native speakers of languages other than English.

“We like to make it as easy as possible for our customers to do business with us,” remarks Managing Director Peter Rooney. “Our people are the key to the organisation’s success: customers see the person first, not the company, and they often decide whether or not to do business with a company on this basis. Our language skills mean customers can communicate more easily with us; they feel more relaxed. I know for a fact that we have won and retained business because of our language capabilities.”

The number of languages spoken within a comparatively small organisation is impressive, spanning French, German, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese.

Companies that find the answers to these questions and respond to this challenge are more likely to benefit from opportunities in international markets.

Case study

Languages come first in recruitment process

Around 80% of Fibretech’s turnover is in export sales, and the Pinxton-based manufacturer of custom-made metallic fibres has firm ideas about the importance of languages in the drive for overseas business.

The company’s recruitment policy considers language competence the most important quality for sales staff. It recognises that sometimes this requires training such linguists in the technical side of the business, but is still confident that this is the best approach for the business.

Case study

Language training for a European business environment

Lubrizol Limited has for the past two years been offering language training to its employees as part of a drive to develop a European identity at its site near Belper in Derbyshire.

The company believes equipping staff with foreign language skills is key to creating this identity, and has introduced a written language policy, outlining its commitment to develop employees' foreign language capabilities and improve links with overseas colleagues and clients.

The company believes that offering staff the opportunity to learn a new language is good for personal and career development. Employees take ownership of their progress with language training, and form small study groups with colleagues from different departments.

The experience has clearly been very positive, with increased communications and better relationships developing with overseas colleagues and clients. Some managers can now conduct business meetings in another language, and other employees are already using their basic knowledge of French or German to develop better contact with clients and colleagues based on the continent.

Other schemes undertaken by the company have been the creation of an internal web site in both French and English, and the development of a partnership with a French college near Rouen: a number of students come to Belper each year for a twelve-month placement, giving a further international dimension to the business.

Where to go next

Organisations

UK Trade & Investment - UKTI

UK Trade & Investment is the government organisation that supports companies in the UK doing business internationally and overseas enterprises seeking to locate in the UK.

Country/market profiles and a wide range of practical help and advice.

www.uktradeinvest.gov.uk

Regional Language Network East Midlands

Part of a UK-wide network, the RLN East Midlands promotes language and cultural skills for business and employment. It offers free, impartial advice and support to local companies, and a direct link to local providers of language services.

www.rln-eastmidlands.com

On-line resources

SOLVIT

On-line tool aimed at helping businesses to overcome communication barriers in international trade.

www.solvit.org.uk

National Language Standards

The approved UK national occupational standards for languages in a work setting.

www.cilt.org.uk/standards

Other titles in this series:

Adapting Materials for International Markets
Commissioning Interpreting Services
Foreign Language Training
Intercultural Skills
Recruiting People with Languages

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CILT, the National Centre for Languages and its Regional Language Networks publish a range of guides for businesses. For more, go to www.cilt.org.uk/rln.



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