

Languages mean business – but not *all* employers know it!

Ian Watson

Business Consultant

Abstract: Drawing on his experience of living and working in various countries and trading successfully using a variety of languages, the author explores the communicative challenges facing corporate and individual executives seeking to thrive in today's economic world. He challenges the view that English is either ubiquitous or that its widespread use will be perpetual. The use and status of foreign languages in other countries offer an insight into different attitudes from which Scottish business may learn. It is argued that a change in attitude would cause us to reconsider the scope and cost of language training because it affords the opportunity to gain a most transferable skill for the employee's own benefit as well as to any future employer. The author proposes that language skills are life skills and not dependent on academic ability. It is hoped the paper will engender discussion.

Keywords: language skills, business and industry, added value, cost-benefit analysis

Introduction

For some considerable time the issue of foreign language skills performance and the impact it has on industry, commerce and the economy that, at the bottom line, rules every facet of our daily life, has been regarded with complacency. The introduction of the new Scottish Baccalaureate in Languages excepted, these fundamental communication skills have shown signs of dystrophy in schools, colleges, universities and training. Perhaps now, when challenging times create the conditions for creative solutions, might be a good time to re-examine the position. On the one hand, the UK has a finite market, limited by its 60-odd million population, will retain an ample public sector even following the spending review, remains resolutely committed to at least a rudimentary welfare state, and robustly seeks to maintain a certain degree of overt sovereignty. On the other hand, it has an almost infinite debt (do you know what a trillion *is*?). It follows that an excellent opportunity to balance the books lies in an export-led recovery. In fact, Scottish Development International and Scottish Chambers International launched the 'Smart Exporter' initiative in early September 2010 to support precisely that¹. It would seem axiomatic that language skills will be needed to attract customers, interest them in our products and services, awaken their desire to purchase them, and act appropriately to close the deal before competitors from elsewhere react more resolutely. But is this understood?

¹ <http://blogs.scotland.gov.uk/jim-mather/2010/09/06/launch-of-smart-exporter/>

Background

Since winding up a tour operating company in the face of a strong pound and decreasing margins a dozen years ago, I have offered consultancy services to companies seeking to introduce or develop products for export markets and had ample opportunity to observe developments over a wide range of sectors from textiles to aquaculture and communications to tourism. There is no doubt we have desirable products. Renewables and bio-technology may grab headlines, but staples such as food and drink remain major players on the world stage and tourism continues to perform well, especially in the Scottish context.

One can then imagine the reaction if the Government, recognising the potential vigour of the situation, were to decide to exploit such favourable conditions, sustained by a relatively weak pound, by imposing an Export Tax of 3% -7% to raise revenue. But this remarkable situation, with a value of up to £ 21 billion, reflects closely the effect on exports of under-investment in language skills by both government and industry according to 'Costing Babel' (2007). This report offers a UK perspective in response to an earlier EU-wide investigation on the topic (Hagen et al., 2006). The figures suggest a business case for investment in language skills. But the return on investment at a national level through education is measured over generations and so would not be popular with governments seeking votes and targeting easy wins. Indeed, time itself is in short supply, as the pattern of world trade changes. The position we face at present owes much to a lack of support for languages, and the associated decline in intercultural awareness, over the last twenty years. A quick fix is not on the cards.

My experience of speaking to business people about this suggests there is an acceptance of, and resignation to, poor performance that simply would not be tolerated in other skills. Many have not really understood that 'things have changed'. Years of attendance at local, national and international trade fairs show that few serious exhibitors attend without staff available to field enquiries in the language of target markets *and* the language of the location. Although many monolingual English-speaking visitors may recognise an amount of English being spoken, they will be simply oblivious to the majority of other languages being used where generally the sales team accommodate the buyer. I cannot recall any English being spoken on the stand at exhibitions in Sweden or Italy when attending on behalf of an Austrian company. That same company would not think of attending any event in UK without all stand staff being able to speak English, knowing full well the number of German speakers likely to be encountered would be limited. I wonder how such a policy might resonate with that of most UK companies. It was interesting that only one private business stand at this year's Scotland's Expo, a premier travel trade event with over 50% international buyers held in Glasgow in April 2009 actually displayed material promoting their product in the languages of potential markets. I know, I checked 3 times.

English is not *the one and only* business language

According to CILT, only 6% of the world's population speaks English as a first language and 75% of the world's population speaks no English at all². In pre-A8 Accession Europe 31% claimed to

² http://www.cilt.org.uk/making_the_case.aspx

speaking English as a foreign language and this would comprise the whole gamut of performance levels. The majority (in my experience of living and working in Europe for over twenty years) probably lies a little lower than the EC aspirational minimum level of ‘Threshold’ or ‘B1’ in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) that calibrates somewhere between a Standard Grade and a Higher. The accession of central European countries, which had close ties with the former Soviet Union, is likely to have lowered the proportion speaking any English given the previous importance of Russian, so it is disturbing to note that a recent study of foreign language skills shows UK as the worst performing nation (Fig. 1).

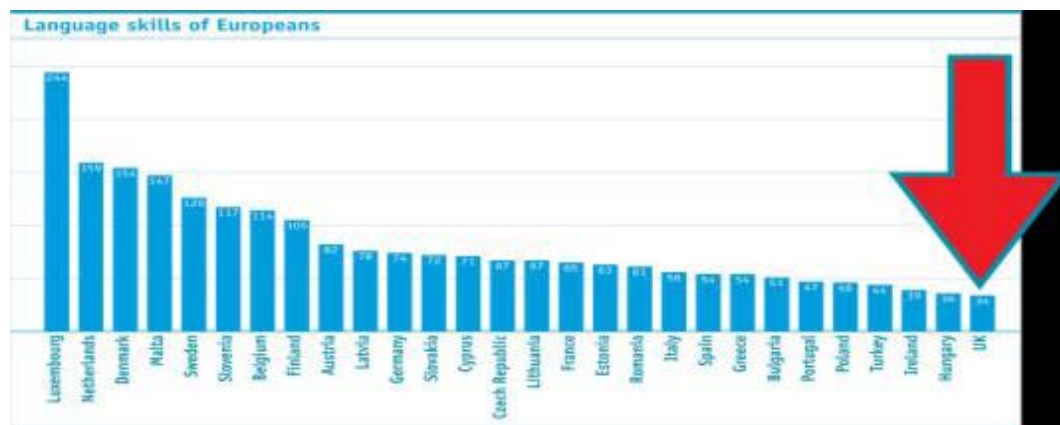


Figure 1: Aggregate of all non-mother tongue skills in each country (i.e. percentage claiming to speak L2 +L3 etc). Source: (CILT, 2005b)

To make matters worse, the UK’s aggregate of 34 is significantly less than that of major trade competitors such as Germany (74) and France (65), and a mere 40% of the average represented by Austria (82). Such a position scarcely engenders confidence, especially in a world where the use of English as an indicator and medium of trade is declining rapidly as shown by research published in the latest CILT agenda.²

These scores reinforce earlier research showing that 80% of UK export managers cannot conduct business in a foreign language (British Chambers of Commerce, 2004) and the proportion of UK executives who can negotiate in another language is half the EU average (Grant Thornton, 2004). It is therefore less than astonishing to find that UK companies are not as willing as their European competitors to trade in their client’s language (CILT, 2005a). The result is that we tend to avoid markets where English speakers are rare, selling more than we buy where English is the language of our customers and vice versa where it is not (CILT, 2005b). This has a less than surprising impact on the balance of trade, especially obvious in manufactured goods. The knock-on effect on invisibles and tourism has been less fully researched, but is unlikely to be different, given the even greater dependence on relationship-building when dealing with intangibles. Would you buy an insurance policy you could not understand?

Set against the somewhat compelling conclusion that 'UK businesses will be severely hampered because language skills are falling behind those in other countries'³ the message from observing best practice is unequivocal: companies with a coherent foreign language strategy do better than those that do not. Put in a European context, '945,000 European SMEs may be losing trade as a result of the lack of language competence ... average loss per business over a three year period is €325,000 (Hagen et al., 2006). Indeed, the Federation of Small Business Membership Survey (2004) reported foreign languages one of three key skills areas where businesses felt the greatest dissatisfaction. Further, nearly half have experienced linguistic or cultural barriers and one in five reported identifiable lost business as a direct result (CILT et al., online).

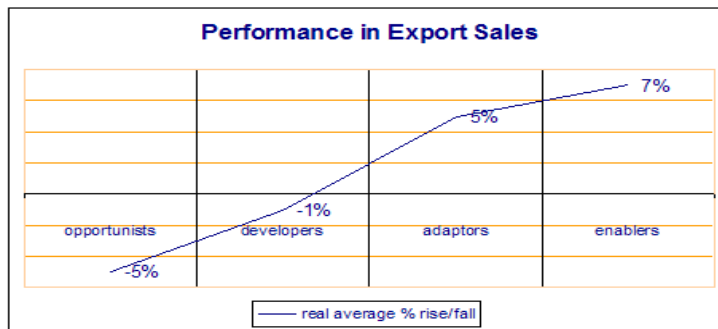


Figure 2: The effect of a coherent language strategy on export performance

Language skills – *douze points*

Yet companies and organisations that actively prepare for the issues raised by foreign language and culture differences do actually perform better (see Fig.2). These companies are categorised as 'enablers' by the British Chambers of Commerce (2003, 2004) and their business is increasing on average by £290,000 per annum. The whole issue of indifferent language and intercultural skills is not new, but its relevance to improved trading is increasing. No less than 75% of companies have reported they recognise a need to improve their foreign language capacity to support future business development. Still, this is largely latent although, according to CBI (2008, 2009, 2010) over 74% are dissatisfied with school-leavers' language skills. UK business does also display a reluctance to train staff to perform work in other languages (CILT, 2005a). In fact, a recent piece in The Times stated that some employers' despair at trying to recruit British staff with high-level language skills led them to look exclusively at overseas candidates (Woolcock et al., 2010).

This mismatch between recognised need and (in)action is incompatible with effective management. Indeed, any employee who recognises an issue that impacts negatively on the performance of an organisation and does not report or act on it is arguably culpable of negligence. Of course, the data supplied above applies to the UK as whole. However, given Scotland's emerging 'smart' economy of advanced technology, science, renewables, tourism, food & drink, and (reviving) financial services, the importance of a flourishing export market with the international communications might well be disproportionately higher here. This might lead one to believe that

³ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/4442223.stm>

government would be under siege by business to support and fund initiatives to improve these fundamental skills. It is not.

There is general acceptance that foreign language skills are useful, a burgeoning recognition that they are becoming necessary, but they are perceived as being 'difficult', 'complicated' and 'nebulous'. All qualities disliked by business, and government, as being heavily resource-dependant, time-consuming and costly, quite apart from being difficult to measure. It is a general life skill that few in UK have had positive experience of, far less achieved mastery with all the benefits this brings. As a result language skills are de-prioritised to the level where UK business people can be regarded in international contexts as having 'learning difficulties', and may well be patronised, although they are unlikely to recognise this. For example, how many have considered the intellectual merits of the immigrant worker, waiting on their table, given their command of English is less than perfect? And then learnt the server has an MBA.

Languages – a tale of two cities (or more!)

There are a number of reasons why foreign language skills seem to suffer from a low priority, but the influence and endurance of English as a *lingua franca* should be put in context, too. English has been a 'world language' for far less than 200 years. Some would argue its prominence dates only from the 1950s, stemming from the influence of US post-war economic reconstruction programmes. However, its dominance is waning, as the economic growth areas and trade shift. Already, it is possible to plot the decline of English as a medium of commerce and trade: internet traffic in English has been falling steadily since 2000 and ICANN⁴ recently lifted the restriction on the use of non-Latin scripts in URLs, thereby opening another channel for other cultures to access the benefits of the net without recourse, even, to Romanised script. The present geo-political climate hardly raises the esteem in which the language of the 'special relationship' partners is held and it would be misguided, not to say arrogant, to misrepresent the language's endurance. History shows few things remain unchanged and we have observed recently just how much things can change in a very short period of time.

Further, there is confusion about what foreign language is for. Proficiency in a foreign language is commonly seen as an indication, in itself, of advanced intellectual ability. Foreign language skills are frequently regarded as inaccessible and even being of limited practical value, despite the significant evidence to the contrary noted above. The ability to communicate in another language has also been placed firmly as a 'soft' skill, in comparison to the more 'muscular' maths and plumbing. It is true that commitment is required to learn a foreign language to a level sufficient to gain an academic qualification, where communicative competency may be less valued than grammatical accuracy and lexical range. The demands on time and effort with rote-learning and drill, evaluation usually by translation that, as a skill or by its theme, may itself be of dubious utility to the learner, are significant to achieve success. Language learning in Higher Education is often based on a study of (usually classic and frequently older) literature and therefore seldom seems particularly accessible or relevant to non-specialist language learners. Such study rarely prepares them fully for the way that language is used in the 'real'

⁴ Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers

world. This is not to suggest that the academic study of a language is a worthless pursuit, but to indicate that a language learnt through residence, work or vocational training is subject to different standards that are just as valuable as, and in some instances, more useful than, a certificate or degree. In the UK, the difference, even if recognised, can be obscure, and the admirable European Language Portfolio that allows owners to record other evidence of linguistic ability alongside examination success, deserves to be better known.

A little language goes a long way

In other countries foreign languages are studied academically for their own sake too, but more rudimentary communication skills are seen clearly, as fundamental to many work roles without which employment opportunities may be limited. These jobs are by no means exclusively in middle- and upper-management roles. The Austrian trucker who is able to deal routinely with border crossings in the relevant local language, may be appreciably less adept using it in other situations, and unlikely to lose much sleep over the matter.

Similarly, the language skills of former UK soldiers are frequently very limited, but that is not say they cannot perform a few elementary 'transactions' well, or that these, admittedly limited, skills cannot be transferred or built upon. I know of tour coach and taxi drivers in Britain who, having gained various driving and 'diplomatic' skills in the forces, have found a smattering of a number of languages useful in building relationships with passengers from different countries. Whilst it is unlikely that any might claim to 'speak' another language, many would assert with some justification that they can deal satisfactorily with a variety of relevant situations. Few, if any, of these drivers will have had formal training in the target languages and are likely to report they have 'picked up' appropriate utterances as responses to routine situations.

The point that should be noted by the skills and training agencies who are in the position to enable job-specific training at various junctures, is that adults can, and are willing to, learn languages like other new skills when it is relevant or beneficial to them. Yet has one ever heard of a vocational foreign language training course being offered to, say, victims of large-scale redundancies, even for those experienced managers and technicians that might be highly valued by a company relocating abroad and would wish to retain their services?

Languages - for Today *and* Tomorrow

This perpetual procrastination is becoming more serious as the (lack of) belief in the utility of language skills is passed down to the next generation. Now pupils are no longer compelled to study at least one foreign language to examination level, fewer and fewer claim the 'entitlement' they have been assured. The result is that some schools in Scotland enter only a handful of candidates for various language examinations and the number of undergraduates studying any language at all is falling steeply. The elective status of languages means they are seen as a marginal skill at best, and this view is passed on to parents who may themselves have had a less than happy experience with the subject, with the result that departments striving to energise interest are fighting an uphill, many-fronted battle that saps morale and leads to the academic equivalent of PTSD.

At present, the future for foreign languages in schools looks depressing despite the best efforts of staff that may themselves be resigned to a marginal position in the school hierarchy. After

all, if your subject doesn't count, it's hardly likely to be high in the queue for resources. In order to raise the value, interest in, and understanding of foreign languages, clear messages need to be heard. For example, a senior manager at VisitScotland recently confided that insufficient native Scots have the language skills to be employed in certain positions in the national tourist office. Similarly, during a recent stay in Aviemore my limited knowledge of Latvian ensured preferential service in the bar of one of the resort's leading hotels.

Some Home Truths

The first is that foreign language skills are primarily life skills that are as important in a progressive society as reading and writing; to quote CILT, they should be seen as a *tool* for learning as much as an *object* of learning. As a skill, individuals will have different levels of performance and may choose to develop one language more fully or a number of languages over a limited range. The waiter who changes between languages, complimenting his guests from various countries on their choice of meal, or offering a further refreshment as smoothly as he moves between tables, may be unable enter into a discussion on the merits of their various governments, but he will pass up no opportunity to make it easy for a guest to buy another cocktail or perhaps suggest they are his sole object of attention. His bonus or tip depends on it. Yet it is unlikely he has learnt these phrases, in the various languages, at a hospitality training college.

Relevance to job needs is vital in vocational language training and, having lost the best part of at least one generation of potential linguists, this form of action appears to be the most useful way to plug the gap until improvements filter through via the educational system. Fortunately, adult learners who seek skills training are, usually, highly motivated, not least owing to having themselves identified skills gaps that, when plugged, can help their career progress. It is not difficult to match supply and demand by training needs analysis (TNA), and the good news for languages is that most of the work has already been done.

Secondly, in common with all skills, different people have different levels of performance, and success should be judged on the achievement of the intended communicative task, rather than against a model that could be described as an arbitrary, and artificial, ideal. Only rarely is a perfect command of a language achieved. Even amongst native language users there will be those who may be hailed as exceptional speakers, but often use lines written by others (actors and politicians spring to mind). Similarly, many great minds find it extremely difficult to express themselves clearly using speech or text, as may be seen by the existence of the Plain English Campaign. In normal interaction, most native speakers will have a variety of registers available for use in different situations, and the ideal of native-speaker competence as a target for foreign language users, is as unhelpful as unachievable. Much better is an acceptance of relative “defective effectiveness” that reflects more realistically the actual performance of most users of a foreign language. There are few diners unlikely to recognise the main ingredient in 'cheekin free kass say' and the use of a present verb form to indicate the future may be a trait of native speakers as much as other users of English. Similar examples of imperfect pronunciation and non-standard grammar exist in other languages. It is indicative for future courses that the recent revision of the National Occupational Language

Standards⁵ recognises this as a feature of communication with lower-level users of foreign languages, with the proviso that such deviation should not compromise the effectiveness of the exchange.

The third point is that language skills are cumulative and almost infinitely transferable. This means any investment in training can be carried forward into different roles and sectors, giving a longer and higher return on investment than many other training programmes. The figure below shows that if the time taken to serve one unit is reduced, there is an increase in profit in the operational period. This data was originally collected in a ski hire operation in Saalbach, where various profit centres had different customer contact and therefore acted as controls. It was further tested in food and beverage service in Scotland and the results show a Pareto effect where small improvements, at the appropriate level, have benefits that impact significantly on enhanced service levels, and profits, a true 'win-win' situation.

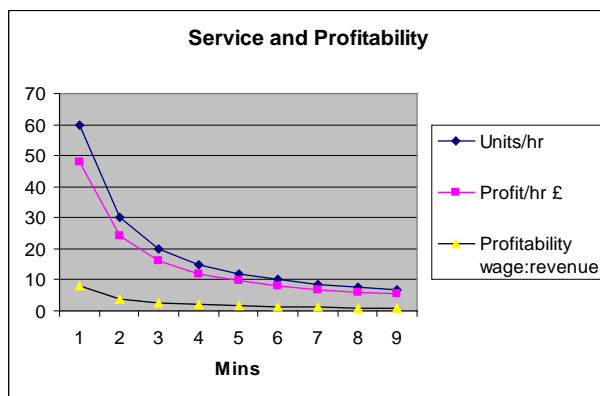


Figure 3: Profitability variance by service duration

This may be tested empirically when comparing the length of check-in queues for international and domestic departures of the same airline. A mere ten seconds extra to process each passenger can add significantly to despatch times, a fact not lost on no-frills airlines. It might be kinder to draw a veil over car-hire reception queues on summer weekends where a three to five minute transaction can quickly double or treble, depending on the *visitor's* (sic) command of English, with predictable results.

Travel, tourism and hospitality businesses point to low staff retention rates as a reason for their reluctance to invest in training for staff that are likely to move on. On the other hand, the language skills of an airport check-in desk worker (greeting, identifying, eliciting further details or information, transacting a cash or voucher exchange, thanking the customer for their business, closing the business and saying farewell) are skills that can be transferred to almost any customer service position, from the car-hire administration mentioned above to bank teller or shop assistant and in non-vocational settings – i.e. when on holiday, or even in gaining employment in the country where the language is used. Any company-specific customisation can be supplied readily, locally: those in doubt should call a number of major hotels and compare telephone answering scripts.

⁵ http://www.cilt.org.uk/home/standards_and_qualifications/uk_occupational_standards.aspx

To experience the effects on a business of poor language, and especially the associated intercultural skills outside tourism I cannot be alone in reaching near-despair when dealing with off-shore 'customer service' call centres. I wonder how many exporters test their own support lines, and assess them from a customer viewpoint. Do switchboard staff even know a sales effort is being made in a certain territory and therefore expect, or prepare for, an increased number of non-standard incoming calls?

Languages and Tourism

It is interesting to glance at the 'establishment' perspective on language skills in tourism, a sector where their value might reasonably be expected to be axiomatic. In 2006 the then Scottish Executive published the 'Tourism Framework for Change'.⁶ It exhorted a proactive marketing approach to business development aimed at creating visitor experiences that were to create 'fans' who would go on to extol the attractions of Scotland worldwide and lead to a 50% increase in value by 2015. A variety of factors was identified as needing attention. Among these, the term 'skills' is mentioned no fewer than 32 times; 'foreign language' is mentioned only once, in the context of rail ticket vending machines, suggesting expansiveness of supply rather than obliviousness to a problem for many visitors. If only this were the case.

The refreshed tourism skills strategy⁷ launched by Scottish Tourism Forum launched in March 2010 could single out only 'chef' craft skills as worthy of specific mention. One wonders as to whether this was the only skills gap the industry could identify or whether it believed this to be the most crucial skill set for its further development. By contrast, an earlier study of language skills in Scottish hotels conducted by Martin & Davies (2006)⁸ found that front line staff were not able to deal with initial enquiries made in a language other than English. With this in mind, it seems industry has missed the point that it needs to be able to attract guests and accommodate them, before it can inform them of the gastronomic delights that await. VisitScotland's foremost overseas target market is the USA, roughly equal in importance to the combined value of its main European markets, France and Germany⁹. Yet it was considered headline news when the Scottish Mining Museum published its guide in French (Midlothian Advertiser 2 Jan 2008).¹⁰ Recruitment and retention of qualified staff remains intractable. This is hardly helped when those encouraged to apply for the Starwood Vita Futura graduate programme (after its praises to educators and influencers were sung at the previous Hospitality & Tourism Skills Scotland event), might have their hopes dashed when noting a *minimum* requirement is being "fluent in English and *at least* 1 additional language"¹¹ yet provision of language skills training for hospitality students seems to be off the trainers' radar. Even in the

⁶ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2006/03/03145848/0>

⁷ http://www.stforum.co.uk/wmslib/PDF_Docs/TFFC_Skills_Strategy_2010-2015.pdf

⁸ <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/hlst/documents/johlste/vol5no1/0094.pdf>

⁹ http://www.visitscotland.org/research_and_statistics/visitor_research/international.aspx

¹⁰ <http://bit.ly/bBFvfp>

¹¹ <http://www.starwoodvitafutura.com/how-to-apply/default.aspx>

recently 'refreshed' "Skills for Scotland"¹² published in October 2010, language skills are only mentioned in connection with ESOL.

Concluding Remarks

The change in circumstances brought about by the 'Credit Crunch' has forced many conventionally held opinions to be questioned. In late August and early September 2010, following the absence of any foreign language in the top ten most examined subjects at GCSE in England, there were many reports in the media that began discussion on the issue of language skills in schools and a 'Google news' search will bring up ample results to keep the researcher occupied. More pertinently, we have language skills needs that require attention if the opportunity to trade out of this slump is not to be missed. We need that attention now.

The first requirement is a more widespread awareness of the fact that English is not *the one and only* world language, it is merely *a* world language amongst several, and indeed trade amongst countries using *English* as a medium of trade is declining. Much academic research may be published in English but the 'added value' of this knowledge is invested in patents and Anglophone countries account for only a quarter of world patent applications (World Intellectual Property Association, online), and this proportion is declining. The belief that the business generated by subsequent manufacture and trade can be carried out exclusively in English could not be further from the actual state of affairs.

Presuming we allow that language skills are needed to remain competitive there follows the issue of which language to learn. It is unfortunate that English, frequently so very precise, does not differentiate between 'system' and 'usage' to paraphrase what Saussure termed 'langue' and 'parole' (de Saussure, 1983 [1915]), but it would seem clear that the system to be learnt is the one that enables communication between two individuals and the usage is that which ensures it is effective. Thus a conductor on the West Highland Line might usefully have a few phrases of German or French to facilitate his daily work. Similarly, the stag or hen who suffixes their destination in Riga with "lūdzu" (Latvian for 'please') might find their cab ride both shorter and cheaper.

Trainers are required to have a number of qualities to deliver skills. They should be able explain what is required, be sufficiently proficient to demonstrate the goal, able to assess and correct performance and choose relevant conditions to allow participants to train and hone their newly-found skills. The skills are not the same as those required by a teacher who has a more all round task of enlightenment and development. The skills needed are much more straightforward and as training materials can be designed to reinforce relevance (many language training materials have been developed already and need only micro-localisation) trainers can themselves be trained without extended timescales or high cost as may be demonstrated by the Swedish programme 'Start' (the experience of which contributed much to the Common European Framework for Languages) in the seventies. In Scotland, we are fortunate to have a diverse culture, with speakers of many useful languages already present, and it is a happy coincidence that many of those with whom we seek to trade, display an

¹² <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/326739/0105315.pdf>

interest in and affinity with this country, so facilitating the issue of external recruitment. Access to the knowledge and experience that has supported the international reputation of Applied Linguistics in Scottish Higher Education should make any training skills or materials development a matter of localisation. The impact of only one trainer taking twenty hours' contact in a forty week year with an average of ten participants per session equates to some 8000 learning hours. Given that a competent trainer can impart a considerable amount of vocational training in a ten contact-hour (100 learning hours) module the cost question may become more manageable, particularly when there is the availability of funding via Individual Learning Accounts, or as part of a redundancy package.

Yet I doubt an improvement in the language skills deficit will be seen in the immediate future. Decision makers who had a poor experience of language learning them-selves are hardly likely to press for a course of action in which they do not honestly believe. More importantly, they might also be of those least likely to have been exposed to a world outside the "Anglosphere" - a world that is well established at present and that will continue to increase in size, as trade and economies shift. For the UK as a whole, and especially for Scotland with such a small population, it is vital that others in the world know that we have excellent products for sale, and that we are open to do business. In order to communicate this message to our potential customers we would do well to remember that they will not pay much attention to us unless they understand us, like *what* and *how* we say it, and on that basis decide they want to do business with us.

Perhaps this is the time to revisit our perceptions of language skills and use the urgency of balancing the national books to focus our view on ways to improve them. Pope was right when he counselled against a little knowledge; it can indeed be a dangerous thing. But if we accept that, in most cases, only a small amount of communication is needed to build the foundations of a more lasting relationship, there is every reason for drinking deeply at this particular well. Too often, our unwillingness to consider the benefits of the water in this well has left us parched.

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