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ORIGINAL PAPER

Foreign language management in Lazio SMEs

Ersilia Incelli

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Abstract This paper investigates the foreign language management strategies of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Lazio, Italy. Based on empirical data from a questionnaire survey and ethnographic interviews, it also aims to validate the hypothesis that macro-level language planning (on a national scale) may not reflect language problems occurring in the micro-dimension of a company or region, giving rise to discrepancies in the language education system. Using this approach, I have attempted to build on the Language Management Theory framework proposed by J. Nekvapil and M. Nekula [*Current Issues in Language Planning,* 7(2&3):302–327, 2006] in their study of Czech multinationals. There will be a high price to pay for companies that fail to have the linguistic competence to play a full part in a competitive global market increasingly centred on English as the lingua franca as well as on multilingual communication. This leads to the need to carefully observe the relationship between macro- and micro-level language planning and reconsider national education policies.

Keywords English as a lingua franca · Language and culture in communication · Language management · Small- and medium-sized enterprises · Quantitative and qualitative data analysis, Written discourse

Abbreviations
LM Language management
SMEs Small- and medium-sized enterprises

E. Incelli
Dipartimento di Studi Geoeconomici, Linguistici, Statistici e Storici per l'Analisi Regionale, Facoltà di Economia, Università di Roma 'La Sapienza', Via Castro del Laurenziano 9, Rome, Italy

E. Incelli (✉)
Via Fausto Cecconi, 20, Int. 2, Frascati, 00044 Rome, Italy
e-mail: ersilia.incelli@uniroma1.it

Introduction

This paper is an exploratory study of the foreign language management strategies of sample SMEs (small- and medium-sized enterprises) in Lazio, (the region around Rome).[1] The study is presented within the framework of the Language Management Theory (Jernudd and Neustupny 1987; Neustupny and Nekvapil 2003, as cited in Nekvapil and Nekula 2006, p. 307) but draws also on theories from the fields of applied and sociolinguistics. The objectives of this study are: firstly, to analyze the key findings of a language survey questionnaire, with the aim of identifying how and when foreign language competence makes a difference in international trade and whether this is adversely affected by language and cultural barriers; secondly, to carry out an in-depth qualitative analysis based on ethnographic interviews with employees (at different occupational levels), with the aim of assessing the impact of language skills on their jobs and how language management strategies determine the attitude and behaviour of their companies with regard to foreign markets. The quantitative part of the study (Part 1) investigates 506 companies, though for the purpose of this paper, only a fraction of the data from the questionnaire is reported and the most salient results discussed. The qualitative analysis (Part 2) provides a much clearer picture of how companies cope with foreign language communication problems (as evidenced in the sample written discourse of the company). Moreover, the recorded interview data revealed that business relationships become more complex because of differences in *ways* of trading, namely cultural differences.

The overall aims of the study can therefore be said to be threefold: to consolidate and confirm existing knowledge and the results of the quantitative study; to analyze additional descriptive data identifying trends and features, with insight into 'real' rather than 'perceived' foreign language problems handled through *language management strategies* in the micro-dimension of the workplace; finally, to draw conclusions for the different possible pedagogical implications of the findings for macro-level language planning policies by considering micro-case studies. In effect, the real impetus for this study is pedagogical, originating from an awareness of the 'gap' between the workplace and academic pedagogical resources (Nickerson 2002; Crosling and Ward 2002) as well as a perceived mismatch between business demands and the education supply (The Nuffield Inquiry 1999) and between macro- and micro-level language planning policies. With this report, I hope to provide insight into these 'gaps'.

The premise: the socio-economic background

The results of the language survey questionnaire suggest that a high percentage of Lazio SMEs carry out business with at least one non-Italian country (70% of the sample respondents) and that English is used for communicating during these transactions even when those involved are from non-English speaking countries (93.7%). However, employers and employees are acutely aware of the fact that they

[1] The European Union classifies a SME as a firm with fewer than 250 employees.

often lack the necessary language skills to communicate proficiently, and companies seem to be just 'getting by' at a basic functional level of a foreign language.[2]

Given that SMEs constitute a 93% share of Italian industry, they are the backbone of the Italian economy. However, despite their importance in Lazio's economy, Lazio SMEs seem to be ill-prepared for the increasingly competitive and changing global marketplace, especially in terms of the rapid transformations and progress taking place in telecommunication and transport technologies. A large number of SMEs, including the case study examples, still have numerous problems crossing national boundaries to sell their products, making them uncompetitive and at a major disadvantage in emerging international markets. As John Hooper stated in *The Guardian*, Sept. 28, 2005, Italian SMEs are uniquely exposed to the challenges of globalization:

> "Most are small and therefore unable to invest in the knowledge acquisition increasingly needed for success […] they need more open competition, yet they are deeply reluctant to pen themselves up to it."

The fact that many products are destined for the export market means there is a need to develop strategies to overcome increasingly diverse linguistic and cultural demands and implies that language and communicative competencies are an important factor for a company's success. Language difficulties lie not just in selling, but they also involve factors such as managing foreign clients, setting up abroad, implementing websites in a foreign language, training foreign staff, translating marketing literature, among many others (Hagen 1999). With ongoing globalization in an interdependent world, competitiveness will increase among companies, which will need to trade further afield into new foreign markets. For example, the director of the canned-vegetables company explained that in order to survive, his company could no longer rely on the small local market in Frosinone (Lazio) but needed to search for new and more distant markets as far away as the USA, which means reconsidering and reorganizing the company's language management resources. However, recent international studies have shown that small companies generally have fewer resources than the bigger multi-nationals and, therefore, they are less likely to have employees with foreign language skills.[3]

In the larger socio-economic context, the relationship between language, trade and economic performance has indirect but discernible effects on a SME's business practices. Economists have long recognized that development is based on specialization and trade and that trade is facilitated by a common means of communication, or a common language. This has been examined in the context of the econometric analysis of international trade flows.[4] The implications are that a

[2] Based on results from the survey, this paper focuses mainly on English as a subject of management activities, which merely reflects the statistical significance of English and does not undermine the importance of other languages.

[3] See, for example, ELISE – European Language and International Strategy Development in SMEs (2001), www.elise.euproject.org, co-funded by the Leonardo da Vinci programme.

[4] For issues of an econometric nature, such as 'does a common language boost trade between some countries at the expense of other languages or other countries?', compare Melitz (2003), Helliwell (1999) and Dalmazzone (1999).

common language fosters growth and development in the same way that international trade promotes economic growth and development; this helps to explain the rise of English as the lingua franca, although the descriptive data from the interviews provide examples of how languages other than English are used and needed in business. Nevertheless, the results confirm that a large proportion of employees' daily communicative tasks are carried out in non-native English, often at a low level of competence. For this reason, SMEs (at least in Lazio) appear to be underperforming and not living up to potential business. Hence the main issue is: *could SMEs be missing valuable opportunities because of poor language competence?* Admittedly, the research reported here cannot fully measure or determine the extent to which SMEs may be losing (or gaining) business as a result of their behaviour and performance with reference to foreign language skills (much more sophisticated statistical research would be needed), but the figures presented in this report provide a general indication of the trend and difficulties of SMEs today. These results, as framed in the Language Management Theory, also raise a further issue. If 'organized management' (macro) relies on micro-management case studies for planning policies (Nekvapil and Nekula 2006, p. 310), can SMEs, which lack the resources to deal with language communication problems, deal with their foreign language difficulties and solve these problems through micro-organized language-planning procedures (often stop-gap measures)? Surely a large part of the responsibility has to be dealt with at the macro level? The data from the survey effectively show that SMEs, unlike multinationals, do not have the means to provide more necessary long-term measures; therefore, is the system failing to provide frameworks and future workers with the language skills required in today's global economy?

Theoretical frameworks

As the study is multi-faceted, the very nature of the work takes an interdisciplinary approach. For this reason, I draw eclectically from Language Management Theory and from various fields in applied and sociolinguistics, adopting a theoretical framework for each stage of the investigation. Of particular relevance to the second part of the study is genre theory (Swales 1990) and interactional sociolinguistics (Yamada 1992) as well as the work of Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) and Hutchinson and Walters (1987) for the general design of the stages of the data collection.[5]

Language management theory

As language management theory is of relevance to the whole study, I will begin with a brief discussion of the framework.

Language management is often used synonymously with language planning, but there are theoretical propositions which separate the two into Language

[5] The stages for data collection involved: a questionnaire, follow-up interviews, visits to the workplace and the analysis of authentic workplace discourse, all carried out during the period 2002–2006.

Management Theory and Language Planning Theory. This paper will not discuss the theoretical aspects of their conceptualization but will take the model proposed by Neustupny (1978) (as cited in Nekvapil and Nekula 2006), who based *macro language planning* on the theory of *language problems*, thereby emphasizing the importance of the micro-dimension in management discourse. Neustupny (1994, p. 50, in Nekvapil and Nekula 2006, p. 309) claims "… any act of language planning should start with the consideration of language problems as they appear in discourse …", which means that macro-planning has its basis in the micro-activity of individual interactions. Nekvapil and Nekula (2006), together with Ferguson's (1977) ideas on 'simple management' (Nekvapil et al. 2006, p. 310), have developed the notion of 'simple discourse-based management', that is, how a speaker handles discourse in a particular interaction with an interlocutor. More specifically, this involves the meta-linguistic activities that characterize language aimed at the production and reception of discourse (Nekvapil et al. 2006, p. 310). In practical terms, the process can be further illustrated by individual interactions in speech events, which occur at 'several layers' and 'several stages', involving *noting, evaluation, planning adjustment and implementation of the discourse*, especially when there is 'a deviation from the norm' (Nekvapil et al. 2006, p. 311). However, not all these stages are needed to complete or carry out an interaction—as long as the necessary *adjustments* are made to avoid a breakdown in communication. This organization of discourse at a micro-level is particularly important for organized language management because the identification of language problems and deviations can lead to more appropriate language planning policies. Hence, organized management (at the individual, institutional, regional or national level) is dependent on 'simple management'. For these reasons, Nekvapil and Nekula (2006, p. 307) see the importance of "the dialectical relationship between macro and micro language planning" in that it can potentially lead to "specific language political measures". (Nekvapil et al. 2006, p. 311). However, macro- and micro-level language management processes do not automatically 'elaborate on' each other. Indeed,

> "… there certainly exist other situations, where organized and simple management do not influence one another by any means. These involve in particular the situations where the language planners underestimate or even deliberately ignore the language problems of the speakers in individual interactions. It proceeds from the theory of language management that such situations are to be criticised." (Nekvapil et al. 2006, p. 324)

Taking this last comment as a starting point, this paper will justify the hypothesis that macro- and micro-level language planning can fail to influence one other and create discrepancies in a country's language education system.

The sociolinguistic perspective

Apart from language management, which deals with strictly linguistic phenomena (such as grammatical errors or mispronunciation), there are also the

communicative and socio-cultural components of interaction between interactants (Nekvapil et al. 2006, p. 312). Social variables comprising the influential spheres of linguistic, communicative and socio-cultural phenomena are closely linked to sociolinguistics, in particular to interactional linguistics (Yamada 1992). Yamada's (1992) cross-cultural communication study on the differences between Japanese and American communication styles offers much insight into how cultural differences can create misunderstanding and mistrust during negotiations between companies and even between countries. Yamada carefully studied the interplay between interactants, and how multicultural settings influence the nature of discourse and the type and choice of rhetorical strategies. This field of work presents a useful approach for business discourse analysis. In fact, current research shows how business practices, both spoken and written interactions, are tightly intertwined with social phenomena and culture as well as with social and professional identities. (Stubbe 2003).

From a sociological perspective, today's globalized economy is closely connected to the transformation of languages and identity in different ways (Giddens 1990 and Castels 2000, both cited in Heller 2003, p. 473). Not surprisingly, a global economy, with the prospect of multilingual communication, calls for a reconsideration of language policies as well as for further research into how the knowledge of languages enhances employability (Grin 2001; Connell 2002). Fairclough (2003, p. 19) sees economies as increasingly 'knowledge-based' and 'knowledge-driven' and hence 'discourse-driven'. It is for this reason that ethnographic studies of written and spoken workplace discourse have become a major focus of interest in linguistics. (See for example: Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris 1997; Poncini 2004; Louhiala-Salminen et al. 2005, for studies on multicultural settings in business; Bamford 2007 and Bowker 2006, for oral business presentations). We will turn now to the first stage in the study, the questionnaire survey.

Part 1: the quantitative study—the questionnaire survey[6]

Methodology and data collection

The study is contextualized in the light of previous work carried out in the field, which proved to be an important factor in setting up the questionnaire and strengthened the reliability of our results.[7] The questionnaire survey was carried out on a stratified and systematic random sample of 506 SMEs in the Lazio region. The companies covered a wide range of the manufacturing sectors (Table 1) to represent a valid 'universe'.

In designing the questionnaire, we required the expert assistance of a professional statistician to set parameters and variables and to advise on closed multiple choice

[6] The full questionnaire can be obtained on request.

[7] See, for example, REFLECT (2002). Review of Foreign Language and Cultural Training Needs. www.reflectproject.com, co-funded by the Leonardo da Vinci programme.

Table 1 Classification of manufacturing companies according to sector [data are from the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) Ateco 91]

Ateco 91 sector codes
DA: Food, beverage and tobacco industry
DB: Clothing and textile industry
DC: Leather industry
DD: Timber and wood product industry
DE: Paper and print industry
DF: Coke, petroleum and nuclear industry
DG: Chemical products and fibre industry
DH: Plastic materials and rubber industry
DI: Non-metal mineral products industry
DJ: Metal industry
DK: Mechanical equipment, installation and maintenance industry
DL: Electrical and optical equipments industry
DM: Transportation industry
DN: Other manufacturing industries

questions with exclusive categories for easier collation on a database, to better extrapolate reliable quantitative data and to guarantee a valid outcome of results. In this way, the questionnaire survey can be considered to be *interdisciplinary* research in that it was created from the point of view of both a linguist and a statistician. Nevertheless, there was the risk of a possible bias in the interpretation of face-value results because of limited interaction with respondents. The information from the qualitative ethnographic part of the research conveniently allowed for more open-ended questions and a wider range of responses, thereby helping to iron out any conflicting data.

Discussion of the results

Exporting position and current foreign languages in use

Prior assumptions being made, a comparative analysis was carried out between national and regional trade trends. The principal countries towards which Italy exports its products are the neighbouring countries of Germany and France, followed by the USA, Spain, the UK and Switzerland. The sample Lazio SMEs follow a similar export pattern, with Germany being the main foreign market (48% of the sample response), followed by France and the UK. The questionnaire reported that 16% of the companies are involved in regular exporting activities (Fig. 1), with almost 60% of these earning more than half of their revenue from exporting abroad (Fig. 2).

About 70% of the sample respondents have dealt with (or deal with) foreign customers. Overall, 76% claim to use at least one foreign language regularly, and English is predictably the most widely used—93.7% of the sample respondents. The percentages for other foreign language use are very low: French, 2.6%; German, 1.5%; Spanish, 1.1% with a limited use of Arabic and Asian languages.

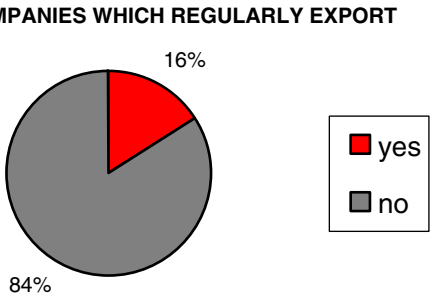

Fig. 1 Question: does your company export regularly?

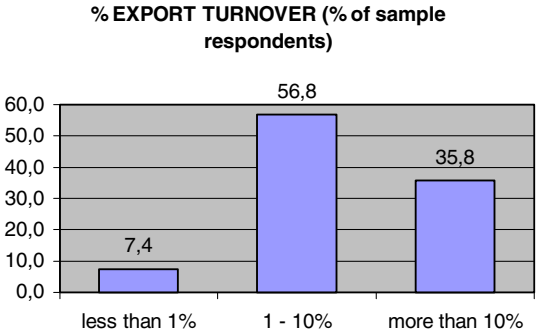

Fig. 2 Question: what is your percentage turnover from international exports?

In Lazio, the pattern of foreign language use in companies reflects the languages most commonly taught in Italian schools and universities, with English having replaced French. (German is taught in some provinces of northern Italy because of neighbouring Austria, Germany and Switzerland). The data show that the top markets do not correlate with the main languages in use in business, meaning that many companies rely on English for trading in non-English speaking markets. The results appear to confirm a commonplace view in global trading—either correctly or incorrectly—that "English is not just *a* global language but *the* global language and the only one that anybody really needs to know". (Cameron 2002, p. 49).

Foreign language skills in the company

About 77% of the working staff said they knew English at some level (spoken and written), followed by French (4.3%), German (1.0%) and Spanish (1.0%). Table 2 below is indicative of proficiency levels. The foreign language capacity of the staff was generally scholastic, meaning the language skills acquired at school are very basic with very little practical application. It is generally known that foreign languages are taught in Italian schools with the traditional mechanical grammar/translation method and tend to follow a 'literature curriculum'. Needless to say, this does not promote fluency or provide the practical language skills needed for company work.

Unfortunately, the findings do not identify at what level of knowledge workplace interactions take place and to what standard—but overall the data indicate that many

Table 2 Indication of proficiency levels of both written/spoken foreign language use when dealing with foreign customers

Proficiency level	Absolute value	Value (%)
Bilingual	12	2.4
Fluent	44	8.7
Good	107	21.1
Scholastic	263	52.0
No Knowledge	80	15.8
Total	506	100.0

companies make do with basic language skills that are just enough to conduct ongoing business. What is more, the level of linguistic proficiency differs greatly between occupational groupings.

Language difficulties

Figures 3 and 4 introduce the levels of perceived difficulties in using a foreign language in the workplace (as opposed to real difficulties) and some of the most common situations in which they occur. Of those responding to the questionnaire,

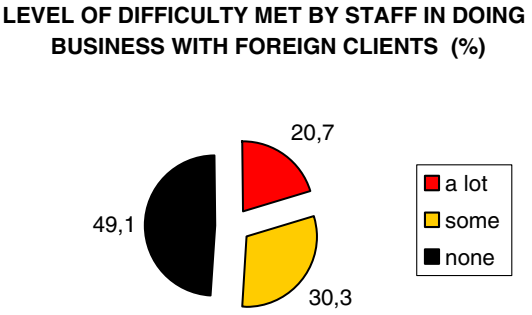

Fig. 3 Question: what level of difficulty do you experience in using a foreign language at work?

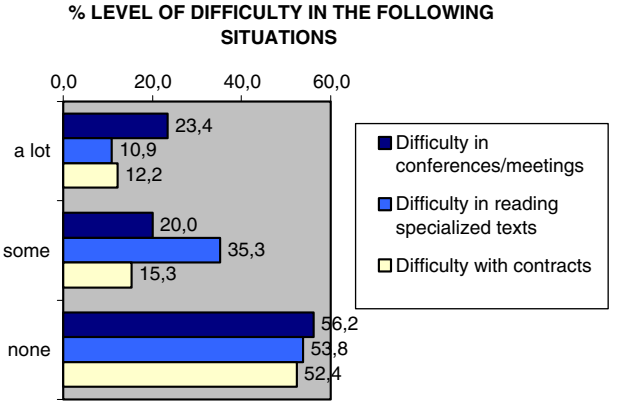

Fig. 4 Question: indicate the level of difficulty in the following situations

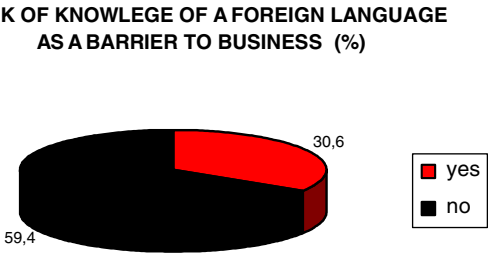

Fig. 5 Question: is the lack of knowledge of a foreign language a barrier to business?

20.7% said they encountered many difficulties communicating with foreign clients, 30.3% perceived some difficulty, and almost half did not perceive any. The findings are important in terms of skills development.

Some situations, such as speaking on the telephone, conferences and meetings, require a particularly good working knowledge of English. A total of 38% of the respondents have major difficulties with speaking on the telephone; 23.4% have *a lot of* difficulty with conference meetings, and 20% have *some* difficulty; 35.3% have *some* difficulty reading specialized/technical texts, and 10.9% have *a lot* of difficulty; 33.6% have *some* difficulty in writing emails, fax, letters and other documents, and 16.6% have *a lot* of difficulty. Other difficulties mentioned were job interviews, negotiating contracts, solving problems, understanding customs/traditional habits, and understanding local bureaucracy; these latter are closely connected to socio-cultural phenomena.

The data show the range and nature of the language skills required, but they admittedly do not indicate the *exact nature* of the need. A more detailed needs analysis of companies would reveal the contexts where the need is greatest, identifying more specific areas for research in language skills development in the workplace.

About 30.6% of the sample SMEs reported barriers to trade resulting from a lack of skills in the relevant foreign language (Fig. 5), which is not surprising considering their perceived difficulties. The regular exporting companies clearly faced more language barriers than companies which dealt less in exports. Interestingly, similar figures are found in other surveys; for example, the CILT (National Centre for Languages) SEMTA report (2003) claimed 47% of 780 sample British companies perceived the lack of language skills as a barrier to trade, illustrating that even native-speaking English companies feel they face difficulties in not knowing the foreign language of the country with which they would like to do business.

Cultural barriers

According to Fig. 6, the awareness of cultural barriers is not as high as the awareness of language barriers to trade. About 12.7% of the respondents said they had experienced cultural barriers, but only 1.8% saw cultural diversities as a major barrier to trade. The ethnographic interviews revealed more awareness of problems emerging from cultural differences. On the whole, it could be that staff do not perceive the problem or underestimate its importance. It is useful to report here a

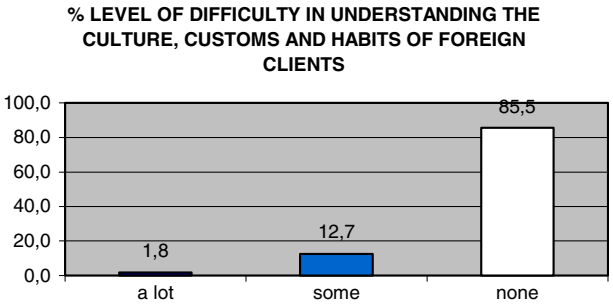

Fig. 6 Question: indicate the level of difficulty you have in understanding local customs and the culture of your foreign clients

previous study carried out by Interact International on Dutch industry, which provided a list of the cultural barriers signalled in trading activities with foreign clients. These include business etiquette, nationalism, business and management styles, social behaviour, negotiating, honesty, holidays and religion.[8] It is most likely that the biggest cultural barriers are experienced in trading with countries in the Far East or the Middle East. (For example, the money-chasing letter reported in a following section of this article created misunderstandings between the Italian steel company and their Chinese clients). However, there are instances of misunderstandings even between the USA and Europe, as well as between European countries, due to not only linguistic but also communicative and socio-cultural problems.

Lost business

Only 7.1% of the sample respondents perceived a loss of business because of language and cultural barriers (Table 3).[9] It was difficult to obtain concrete data proving a real loss of trade. This needs more investigation. Therefore, in this study, perhaps it is more correct to talk about a loss of 'potential' trade. The figures relating to loss are probably an understatement of the real loss. More specifically, the communication deficiencies (according to the audio-recorded data) lie in the inability to follow up opportunities such as replying to a foreign sales demand too late because of the incapacity to respond quickly to emails and/or telephone calls or to organize meetings with potential clients.

As shown in Fig. 7, English presents the biggest problem (81.8% of the respondents) in that staff feels incompetent and lacks a certain degree of confidence in using it with representatives of foreign companies, followed by French (4.5%) and Spanish (4.5%). Asian languages (4.5%) present more of a problem than

[8] TNO Report STB-01-01. (2000: 18). Report on survey on Foreign Languages and Cultural Aspects among Dutch Businesses. Interact International.

[9] A similar low percentage results appear in other surveys. For example, the UK Department of Trade Language Study report, (DTI) 1999, claimed only 7% of British companies perceived a loss of business because of language and cultural difficulties.

Table 3 Question: do you perceive a loss of business because of language and cultural barriers?

	Absolute value	Value (%)
Yes	36	7.1
No	470	92.9
Total	506	100.0

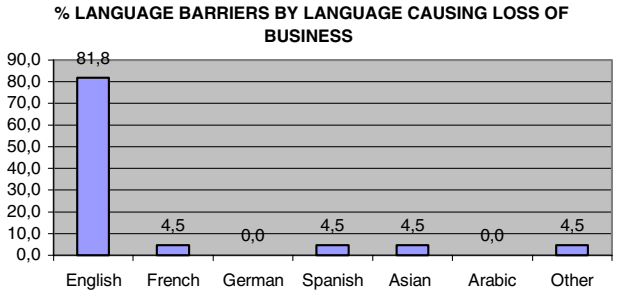

Fig. 7 Question: which languages in particular have caused a loss of business?

German (English is probably a substitute for German, and there is increasing trade with Asian countries).

Organized language management strategies adopted by SMEs

The lack of in-place planned language management strategies for dealing with language and cultural problems in given markets may explain the high proportion of SMEs experiencing language barriers (Fig. 5, 30.6%). The data revealed how companies use micro-organized management strategies to solve the language difficulties of their staff: 20% of the respondents resort to external services, in the form of interpreters (64%), translators (32%) and local agents (2%). In truth, these are solutions which side-step language and cultural barriers and may not really be the most effective way for successful global marketing in the long term. Other methods indicated include external language schools (30.6%), employing staff with foreign language skills (25%) and recruiting native speakers (2.4%). These represent more solid language management strategies, but even the bigger SMEs are prone to solve their problems with 'stop-gap' measures and resort to individual, 'simple discourse-based management' adjustments.

Conclusions to part 1

The overall results indicate that small companies feel a general widespread inadequacy in foreign language competence. They are aware of the probable wide-ranging linguistic demands needed to cover more markets, but they do not have the apparent language capacity to aspire to new markets. Unlike multinationals or bigger companies, which can provide staff with the opportunity to take language courses or maintain a policy of exclusively recruiting staff who are well-qualified in

languages, SMEs need assistance in developing more long-term investment in language training. This surely can only be provided by macro-organized planning policies at higher levels. Unless measures are taken, the level of capacity in English and other foreign languages will remain low, and the range of languages taught will remain narrow, maintaining the gap between market opportunity and language capability.

Part 2: the qualitative study

This part of the study consisted of a series of ethnographic interviews carried out in January 2006 with employees from six of the original 506 Lazio SMEs included in the questionnaire survey: a pharmaceutical company, an insulating isothermal panels company, a steel manufacturing company, a food company, a logistics (road haulage) company and an aerospace company (this latter was not a SME but provided interesting material for comparative analysis). The pharmaceutical company was the largest SME (approximately 200 employees) and the most internationally competitive, with 90% of its operations in exports and imports; the canned-vegetables company was the smallest with only four employees.

Theoretical frameworks

As previously said, I used an eclectic approach and applied frameworks from the fields of Language Management Theory, applied and sociolinguistics. Language management (Nekvapil and Nekula 2006) provides a useful framework for analysing the 'simple management' of written discourse consisting of the request and reply sequence of email and fax business correspondence. I also found Swales' (1990) notion of *discourse community* and his socio-rhetorical network of the workplace community a useful approach for analysing and ordering the descriptive data from which I adopted the categories listed below.

(1) The participants: two product managers, two engineers, one administrative manager, one technician, three secretaries, two company directors (who were also the owners).
(2) Main channels of communication: the Internet and electronic mail, (the fax machine was the main mode of communication with the Chinese company).[10]
(3) Level of expertise: a minimum of 5 years' job experience, which guaranteed accurate and informed responses.
(4) Common goals: the general quest for economic survival. The two larger SMEs had fewer problems of this kind. As Le Vasan (1994, p. 39) pointed out, profit is the 'raison d'être' for language competence and determines the choice of genre in business; consequently, language holds the key to successful business operations.
(5) Community-specific genre: a written discourse corpus of 35 email and fax letters (23 non-native English texts, seven American-English texts, five French texts).

[10] This may be due to authorization problems with Internet access in China.

(6) Specialized terminology: specialized language related to the business community, including acronyms and abbreviations; for example: L/C = letter of credit, dwg file = drawing file.

Data collection and methodology

The main method for collecting the data for this part of the research was through seven face-to-face interviews and four telephone interviews.[11] Each interview lasted about 30 minutes and were audio-recorded for reliable tape-script data. I was also able to collect samples of email and fax correspondence which I used to build the written corpus for the linguistic analyses.

All the informants were very co-operative and supplied extra information about their company's history, its general economic and export performance, the customers, staff recruitment procedures, the technology and channel used and the general working environment. As an ethnographer, I was also able to catch glimpses of the SMEs' routine work, taking brief in-situ field notes about procedures and the type of communicative language activities**.** With this additional information, I created useful case study profiles for each company, which provided a more complete socio-economic picture.

Analysis and results

Descriptive data

The flow of spontaneous comments and conversations (often long stories!) needed a lot of ordering, sifting and sorting out of the data. I identified recurrent features, themes and patterns. The findings can be divided into two main categories. On the one hand, similarity and unanimity on issues which confirm the existing quantitative data—for example, the general dissatisfaction with the level of English and the perceived need to improve foreign language skills for instrumental purposes. On the other hand, new information emerged from the interviews and the textual analysis of workplace texts about the type of 'simple organized management' used to communicate with foreign business partners and the strategies they used to ease communication and adjust to 'deviations from the norm' through the stages of "noting, evaluating, planning readjustment and implementation" (Nekvapil and Nekula 2006, p. 311).

I will deal here first with some prominent features from the interview data which coincide with issues of current international debate and attention in the research and teaching of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and, secondly, with some concrete examples of the problems encountered by staff in managing foreign language usage.

[11] The participants needed reassurance that their names and information would remain confidential and would not be used against them or discussed anywhere else except for research purposes.

Skills, type of work and the extent of English usage

The interviews were a source of systematic description of organized management in the companies. The data revealed the general feelings of the staff in terms of their attitudes to foreign languages. They spoke about the impact of language skills on their jobs, their perceived needs in foreign language skills, the mode and purpose of communication and the degree to which linguistic competence determines the attitude and behaviour of the company with regards to foreign markets, how they felt about information technology and whether they actually experienced linguistic and cultural difficulties as an obstacle to business.

The participants identified the tasks they performed and which languages they used the most to carry out these tasks. Practically all of their external foreign language company communication was in English (90%), with a smattering of other languages used, mainly French, German and Spanish, depending on the need. In terms of the level of foreign language competence, only two of the individuals interviewed, the export manager and the insular panels engineer (the most frequent users of a foreign language) felt confident with English being the foreign language used most extensively. All of the others considered their foreign language competence (especially English) to be below average in all skills. Most of the difficulties encountered were in oral communication. The telephone was frequently mentioned, as was the difficulty in expressing opinions and conveying nuances at meetings. As mentioned by the engineer of the aerospace company, "technical terminology in another language is not a problem, but making social conversation or negotiating terms of conditions is another matter". In addition, the type of work influences the workers' meta-linguistic activity; for example, the pharmaceutical technician rarely wrote in a foreign language, but read many technical manuals in English or German and spoke English occasionally to the foreign maintenance experts. All in all, their language and communicative competence needed to cover a wide range of linguistic skills, from handling telephone enquiries, negotiating prices and contracts (carried out to a large extent by email), organizing product delivery, reading technical manuals, writing reports/faxes/emails, giving presentations to media literacy involving the creation of websites to market company products and services for an international community. This latter skill proved to be a major obstacle for four of the sample SMEs.

The website as a communication strategy

How SMEs present themselves on the Internet (and in their literature), as a marketing tool, is very relevant to how they are perceived in international markets.[12] The smaller SMEs did not appear to have the competence or resources to activate a company website. On the other hand, the pharmaceutical company website, aimed at an international community, was exclusively in English, with no apparent emphasis on a national market. The insular panel company website was available in six languages—Italian, English, German, French, Spanish and Polish—reflecting

[12] See Salvi et al. (2007) for an in-depth discussion of the use of English in online company websites.

their main European markets. The canned-vegetables company had two pages of product pictures with very little written text.

English as the lingua franca

This paper touches on the delicate issue of *English as a lingua franca* and the role of other foreign languages in companies and, therefore, requires comment, although space limitations as well as the scope of this study do not allow for a discussion of the subject. (For detailed studies, see Spolsky 2004; Ammon 2006; Erling and Hilgendorf 2006; Mar-Molinaro and Stevenson 2006, among others).

The following sample answers in the interviews reflect the current conflicts existing at European and international levels. The first comment below by the pharmaceutical export manager, clearly illustrates how markets dictate the language policy of the company and provide the economic reasons for using a common language in trade, attesting to how economic efficiency determines the preferred 'organized language management' strategy of a company.

> "We use English as a matter of policy. We deal with over 35 countries and it would be impossible to learn other languages. It's just not practical. It's not cost-effective. English suffices."

In truth, the company cannot afford to use more than two (or three) languages in the company.

Another example of language management policy was provided by the aerospace engineer: "With the French we speak English because then we are equal and nobody has the upper edge". This shows how important it is for business people to approach business transactions on a par, whereby a common tongue (a lingua franca) acts as a basis for neutral ground in negotiations.

Although English certainly qualifies as the international *working language* (with all the evidence and statistics to prove this), the ethnographic data revealed cases where other foreign languages are used, as well as instances of where 'English is not enough'. The logistics/road haulage company expressed the need for the knowledge of foreign languages other than English for practical reasons 'on the road', such as road police, customs, road services. The director of the company gave the example of how the transport and delivery of goods to Poland, which previously took a full month and proved very expensive, was reduced to 1 week when the driver learned to speak Polish.

The Italian canned-vegetables company provides another example of other language preference. In dealing with French food companies, the Italian company uses French exclusively for all business transactions, both spoken and written. Similarly, the pharmaceutical technician dealing with German experts for the technical maintenance of German equipment found it more useful to find "someone who spoke German" in the company.

These latter instances present a strong case for pursuing the promotion of other foreign languages in school curricula and not exclusively an 'English 'first' or 'only' policy, reinforcing the EU Commission's commitment to multilingual programmes in which they urge national language planning to pursue the acquisition

of 'two additional foreign languages' in schools. However, as yet, many in the literature generally agree that there is still no 'explicit language policy' which addresses the delicate issue of 'conflicting interests' (Erling and Hilgendorf 2006, p. 267). Perhaps a solution could be to look at concrete examples of what is happening on the micro-scale. Spolsky (2004) purposely presents detailed case studies which illustrate the multi-faceted nature of the issues involved in implementing national language policies and, in particular, the relationship between *management, practice* and *ideology*.

Written discourse correspondence

The participants confirmed a far greater use of written English compared to spoken English, with the exchange of email messages as the most frequent activity—that is, 80% of the daily or weekly contact with foreign companies. The export product manager of the pharmaceutical company received between 80 and 100 English-language emails every day. The main purposes of the written exchanges were to: follow up orders, request cost clarifications, negotiate better terms/conditions, organize business trips/meetings, arrange delivery and pick up dates, explain the use of technical equipment, propose technical projects and request payment (i.e. a 'money chasing' letter). This latter correspondence was part of a series of emails from the Italian steel company asking for payment from a Chinese company.

Simple and organized management in written discourse

It is important to note here that, unlike spoken discourse, the written word is more permanent and can be interpreted as an official document. This implies that misunderstandings in written correspondence, if left equivocal, can become serious and even lead to a breakdown in the business transaction. On the other hand, in simple spoken discourse management, 'deviations from the norm', such as inappropriate lexis or mispronunciation, can be immediately repaired through the stages of 'notation', 'evaluation' and 'adjustment'. Written correspondence needs clarity (if not accuracy) for successful transactions, and for this reason, both clarity and accuracy are often established through a series of letters and a sequence of responses which renegotiate, clarify and/or confirm something previously written in an earlier fax or email. Stages similar to the spoken 'simple management' process occur, but these differ in terms of 'adjustment' time. The following examples illustrate some of the types of problems that non-native speakers have in writing commercial correspondence and show how at some point in time there may have been 'faulty' business communication, either due to specific language deficiencies (for example, inaccurate grammar, inappropriate lexis, mother-tongue interference) or a different cultural predisposition of the business letter as well as from a different *way* of doing business. (compare Yamada 1992 for a detailed account of this field of study).

Fax 1a, the money-chasing letter provided below, has many examples of transfer and mother tongue interference in the lexical items. Some can be classified as 'false friends', i.e. words literally translated into English from the Italian. For example, the

correct translation of *pretend*, literally translated from the Italian *pretendere*, would be *to demand* in English. Other lexical 'false friends' are underlined in the original version of the fax below (including grammatical errors).

fax 1a:

Attention to Mr Paul
Cogliate, 21st September 2005
Subject: booms 36 MT. and not paid expired invoices

We refer to our last letters without any reply. Today, 21.09.2005, we are *newly* here asking a *definitive* clarification about what you must pay to us and your *intentions* for the delivery of the booms 36 mt. All this is *making* us a lot of *troubles*. Our bank has forced us to make a plan for this amount of money: *eur. 203.840.25*. We *pretend* monthly *expirations.*

Now we have to *define* the situation, we have always been *very comprehensive* with you and we will be like that again if your behaviour will give us the chance to go ahead and to solve our problems.

We *pretend a plan* for the payment of eur. 203.840.25 and also *a plan* for the delivery of the booms 36mt.

Best regards, G.

The issue is whether the Chinese correspondent would be able to understand the meaning of the Italian 'false friends' *pretend* or *expirations*, and to what extent such language transfer causes misunderstandings in communication. Let us take another example with the word *newly* (probably a direct transfer translation from the Italian word *di nuovo* meaning *once again*). It would have been more effective and polite to substitute it with the adverb *kindly*, which is a useful politeness strategy for mitigating requests (Brown and Levinson 1987; Yule 1996). These examples provide evidence of 'cultural norms' in letter writing. All in all, the money-chasing letter with a strong cultural bias in lexical choice may have delayed smooth business transactions. The Italian company tries an 'adjustment' strategy (fax 1b) (or face-saving strategy, Yule 1996) by trying to insert a minimum of understanding about the Chinese situation, the risk being that transactions will close if the Chinese do not pay up.

fax 1b: We have always been very comprehensive with you and we will be like that again if your behaviour gives us a chance … to solve our problems.

The Chinese company's reply to the letter (fax 2) was also culturally specific, rhetorically indirect in that they avoided the problem of payment, finally placing the main purpose of the letter at the end, which the Italian company found disconcerting.

fax 2: Please remind do not miss the cylinders and the small items for the delivery. We shall arrange to open L/C to order some 42m booms. Now it is the hot model in China. The market in China is moving again time by time.

We are suffering the bad situation for more than 1 year. We wish our business will start to run in smooth and right way again. Best regards, Paul

A similar situation of misunderstanding occurred on shipment prices and custom duties between the Italian canned-vegetables company and an American food company. One can deduce that it may not only be an issue of business practice but also a question of language management and clarity. In the example below (email 1), the American food company is accusing the Italian company of overcharging. (Notice the use of 'aggressive' uppercase letters for forceful declarations). Nevertheless, the American correspondent finishes with a face-saving adjustment '*Help?*' signalling cooperation. The same manoeuvres and adjustments are made by the Italian correspondent, a series of repairs follow in the chain of business correspondence:

email 1: I understood that these other costs were included in our pricing, and Brian was responsible for duty only. The difference is 188.69 USD. IN THE FUTURE—these costs must be estimated and calculated to the customer if the customer is going to be responsible for paying them. Will we be looking at these additional charges for Romas small candy order as well? If so, I must disclose this to Bob before he places a PO. Help?

The Italian company (emails 2 and 3) needs to secure business and replies accordingly. Aston (1993, p. 229) pointed out how, in intercultural settings, 'interactional' discourse acts as a 'facilitator' for successful transactions, whereby misunderstandings can be more easily interpreted as "errors rather than offences." Notice how grammatical errors in the Italian company's emails do not hinder the real meaning of the message.

email 2: I will to pay back the amount. Please say him to give out an invoice for this amount and pay only the difference. You understand that this was an operation to begin the work with J. Kings but has not to be the way to continue. Best regards, A M.

email 3: So duty applied was 5% and not 6.3%. But also for this time there isn't any problem. I have to understand and Mr. Brian too!!! Please inform that J. Kings may issue invoice for the amount they are paying more. Regards A.

In sum, the examples witness language management in which the dynamics of the interaction involve competence in all three spheres of language, communication and culture as phenomena. The data suggest that misunderstandings occurred when communicative and cultural phenomena entered the dynamics of the discourse and the interplay of the variables, unassisted by grammatical accuracy, caused a delay in smooth business transactions. Although the employees expressed their concern for grammatical inadequacy, what really mattered was getting somebody to do something at the receiving end of the message, as long as the inaccuracies created "'no serious consequences for the company […] and no legal implications", commented the export product manager. 'What counts is what a text does more than how the text is worded.'' (Vergaro 2004, p. 202).

Organized language management: language learning

All of the interviewees had studied a foreign (European) language at school or university, but they had come away feeling that their language competence, with particular reference to English, was inadequate, the belief being that learning a language well would help them cope with more demanding communicative tasks, eventually leading to a possible 'gateway to promotion'. However, in practice, the employees received little support from their company in making progress with a foreign language. This is common in SMEs with fewer resources. The bigger SME, the pharmaceutical company, agreed to send staff on language courses abroad during staff holidays. This did not go down well with the staff, "nobody has any intention of giving up their hard-earned holidays" (PA secretary). Whereas it is common practice for larger companies, especially multinationals, to organize both business language courses as well as 'cultural awareness' courses, as mentioned by the engineer who had previously worked for Kimberley Clark multinational.

It could be that language skills are not given the amount of attention they deserve at school and university, or the need is perceived only later at work. Nevertheless, the claim can be made that workers are in need of more foreign language training and that the smaller the SME, the fewer the resources, the smaller the chances of improving language skills and the smaller the chances of expanding business.

Implications and applications

The results of this study are interesting because they provide valid pedagogical and political insights for language planning in professional contexts. The SMEs participating in this study were approached with this in mind. Through a better understanding of the specific, daily language communication tasks, we can modify objectives and update policy and teaching sources in parallel with evolving technological resources. In addition, language planners and teachers should be analytically aware of specific texts in specific contexts to match learning and workplace needs. The immediate implication is to integrate language courses with the teaching of professional genres through contrastive analyses in order to foster the development of meta-cognitive awareness in students about their own culture as well as other cultures and to develop the skills to identify appropriate ways of interacting in different business contexts. These objectives are actively pursued in our university language classes at the Faculty of Economics, Rome University 'La Sapienza'.

Concluding remarks

Although the size of the corpus in the qualitative analysis was modest, the results can be regarded as satisfactory for the purpose of this study for two reasons: firstly, because the results in the quantitative survey were verified by the additional data from the ethnographic interviews, observation notes and written discourse;

secondly, because a better understanding has been obtained of the communication demands placed on workers in SME business environments, in particular the need to raise standards in English and other foreign language competence to be better equipped for a global marketplace. These results show that Lazio SMEs, at this period in time, do not seem to be exploiting their export market potential as much as they could or would like to, and foreign language competence has been proved just as important to successful business as other practical tasks.

In conclusion, in the European Commission document (22/11/2005) 'A New Framework Strategy for Multilinguism', the Commission explicitly included for the first time responsibility for multilingualism and reaffirmed its commitment to promote a strategic framework for actions in this policy area. The main aims are "to encourage language learning and promote linguistic diversity, and to promote a healthy multilingual economy" (p. 3). If, at the EU level, there is a strong awareness that the future lies in enhancing the economic, cultural and social position of students in an interconnected world, placing high value on professional qualifications, then surely responsibility for pursuing the claims should equally fall on macro- and micro-level areas of national and regional planning and cannot be left purely to market manoeuvres or individual companies. If language learning is supposed to be a key component in pursuing the objectives of co-operation and helps to fulfil the aspirations of people, then perhaps in this spirit, there is a strong case for the commissioning of projects which investigate issues such as language policy and language management.

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Author Biography

Ersilia Incelli is an English language lecturer in the Faculty of Economics, Rome University 'La Sapienza', Italy. Her research interests currently lie in sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, with reference to professional identities and workplace discourse.