

# Basic International Communications for Business



A guide to the small things  
that can make a big difference

Invest   
Northern  
Ireland

# FOREWORD

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Strong communication skills, including language skills, are a key ingredient of export success. To assist local companies to export successfully, Invest NI 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, trade missions and dedicated in-market 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 Invest NI, in association with Language Network Northern Ireland, to assist companies to 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.

## 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.

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## INTERCULTURAL SKILLS

**Adapting to its clients needs has been the key to Brett Martin's success in South America with its range of plastic construction products. The company provides an excellent service and also ensures that clients feel at ease because key staff members are familiar with each client's own country and culture.**

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.

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## 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.

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## SPELLING AND ALPHABETS

**The software and hardware for CEM Systems access control equipment was adapted to Chinese text for installation at Hong Kong Airport. The company's new 'webEntry' product is selling very successfully in Japanese and Chinese text versions.**

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 (petite et moyenne entreprise) in French and PYME (pequeña y mediana empresa) in Spanish. It is always better to use full titles rather than acronyms or abbreviations.

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## NUMBERS

Numbers may not appear to show much variation but, in fact, there are differences which can be significant.

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 significant 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 Germany 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 they still survive in everyday speech. They also survive in the USA but confusingly they often represent 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.

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

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
०	१	२	३	४	५	६	७	८	९

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 O (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.

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.

**Other booklets in this series - Interpreting for the Public Services, Business Interpreting and Conference Interpreting - provide more detail on this subject. The BLIS Professionals website provides a database of translators, interpreters, language trainers and cultural briefing consultants. [www.blis.org.uk](http://www.blis.org.uk)**

## 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 etc 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.

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.

You should note that:

- Professional translators work 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.

**Same product - different names; Giltspur Scientific manufactures a protective shoe to reduce the problems of lameness in dairy cattle. The product is called Cowslip in North European markets but the name has been localised to Sabotinnes for the French, Spanish and Italian markets.**

The 'Translations - getting it right' booklet in this series provides more information.

## OFFSHORE ENGLISH

The English language has spread round 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. However the English that is used can vary from 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.

**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.**

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.

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## 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 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.

## LANGUAGE LEARNING

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.

**Improving sales of water systems for caravans and boats in German speaking markets is a strategic goal for Munster Simms Engineering. Its European sales manager has recently completed a course in advanced business German to help to achieve this.**

## LANGUAGE STRATEGIES

Research has shown that one company in five has lost business due to language and cultural barriers. Only one company in ten has a language strategy - processes and procedures that enable them to deal with fairly predictable problems.

An audit and report will determine:

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

Companies that find the answers to these questions and respond to this challenge are more likely to benefit from opportunities in international markets. The UKTI Export Communication Review provides financial assistance for an audit.

**Europe is a key market for Valpar products for the beverage industry. The company's successful language strategy includes the employment of key sales staff with fluent French, German, Dutch, Italian and Spanish and the use of language skills at international trade shows, in advertising and in all correspondence in the target languages.**

Further information can be found on several websites.

<b>United Kingdom Trade &amp; Investment - UKTI</b>	Country/market profiles and a wide range of practical help and advice. <b><a href="http://www.uktradeinvest.gov.uk">www.uktradeinvest.gov.uk</a></b>
<b>Invest Northern Ireland</b>	The economic development agency for Northern Ireland. <b><a href="http://www.investni.com/trade">www.investni.com/trade</a></b>
<b>Export communications review</b>	Consultancy and advice on language and cultural issues. <b><a href="http://www.britishchambers.org.uk/exportzone">www.britishchambers.org.uk/exportzone</a></b>
<b>DTI Guide - Improving your export communications</b>	<b><a href="http://www.uktradeinvest.gov.uk">www.uktradeinvest.gov.uk</a></b>
<b>BLIS Services</b>	The one-stop shop for language and cultural expertise. BLIS Professionals gives quality assured access to language trainers, interpreters and cultural briefing consultants. BLIS Jobs facilitates the recruitment of staff with language skills free of charge. <b><a href="http://www.blis.org.uk">www.blis.org.uk</a></b>

## How to guides

CILT, the National Centre for Languages and its Regional Language Networks, provides access to the range of How To Guides including:

- Business Interpreting.
- British Sign Language Interpreting.
- Interpreting for the Public Services.
- Conference Interpreting.
- Translation - Getting it right. (© Institute of Translation and Interpreting).

To contact your local Language Network, go to **[www.cilt.org.uk/rln](http://www.cilt.org.uk/rln)**



**If you require a copy of this publication in an alternative format (including Braille, large print or audio tape), please contact:**

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