**Language Management in the UK: Strategies for Dealing with Foreign Language Encounters in the Financial Sector.**

Abstract

Much of the current research into language management in multinational companies (MNCs) focuses on the issues faced by non-native English speakers. This pilot study attempts to broaden the debate by addressing on the attitudes to language use in international business of native English speakers. It is based on interviews conducted with managers from four different investment management companies headquartered in the UK. It establishes that managers believe that the use of English alone is sufficient to conduct business successfully internationally. These assertions are contradicted by their frequent descriptions of how the use of the local language is an essential factor in the success of key aspects of their work. The study concludes that these contradictory findings reflect British businesses’ unwillingness to engage actively with issues of language use, and that knowledge of a foreign language is not perceived as a valuable part of an English mother-tongue professional’s skills portfolio.

Keywords: English as a lingua franca; language policy; financial sector; language skills.

This paper focuses on a study of the language use within investment management companies headquartered in the United Kingdom which therefore use English as the company language. All the companies emphasised their global reach in their websites and publicity materials. The study aimed to investigate the strategies managers used in encounters with non-English speakers and to establish the extent to which languages other than English were used by managers in these companies. In particular it asked whether foreign language use might impact on competitive advantage, since all the company websites maintained that access to local knowledge gave them an edge in the intelligence gathering which underpinned investment decisions in new or emerging markets. Since much of the current literature deals with the language policies of companies headquartered in countries where English is not the first language, this paper hopes to contribute to a broader understanding of how the use of English facilitates or adds to the complexities of business dealings by focusing on the perceptions and practices of native speakers of English or those working in a native speaker environment.

It is often stated that study of language use and language policy in business is a neglected field (Feely and Harzing, 2002; Maclean, 2006; Marschan-Piekkari *et al.*, 1999). There are signs, however, that this is beginning to change. A recent edition of the Journal of World Business (2011, 46:3) contained a special section on languages the purpose of which was to ‘set the agenda for language-sensitive research in international business and management, and add momentum to the emerging interest in ‘language’ and ‘languages’ (Piekkari, 2011). This reflects a growing body of work which has emerged in the last ten years. Much of it has focused on multi-national companies (MNCs) and predominantly features case studies of companies headquartered in countries where the national language is not widely spoken, often in Scandinavia. It aims to analyse how companies can best manage the diversity of languages spoken across their various subsidiaries across the globe (Andersen et al*.* 2004; Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2011; Harzing et al., 2011; Marschan et al., 1997; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999). Since these themes are arguably equally relevant for companies headquartered in English-speaking companies, some of the major recent findings are summarised below, to provide a contextual framework for the study. Firstly, the paper will discuss recent research on the nature of the language barrier and strategies for overcoming it. It will then summarise findings of earlier research on British business attitudes to language learning before going on to discuss and problematize the role of English as a business lingua franca and issues which might arise from its use for the linguistically unwary. Finally, it will present the findings of the study in the context of this discussion.

Language use in MNCs

The notion of language as a barrier informs the earliest research on language, which took place in the context of the globalisation of the world economy. Language was represented either as a (generally unquantified) cost (von Glinow, 1988) or was identified as one of the factors contributing to cultural difference (Kogut and Singh, 1988). More recently, building on Marschan-Piekkari and colleagues’ earlier (Piekkari et al., 1997; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999) work, Feely and Harzing (2003) attempted to categorise the extent to which language difference creates barriers. They identify several key factors which determine this: language diversity, which they define as the number of languages with which a company has to deal across its operation; language penetration, or the extent to which different functions have to be able to work across different languages; and language sophistication, or the level at which employees have to be able to function in a given language. They also attempt to systematize the fields in which the language barrier has the greatest impact, listing buyer seller relationships, foreign market expansion, HQ subsidiary relationship and staffing policies (Feely and Harzing, 2003:41-2). All of these issues, and particularly the last three, have direct relevance for the UK companies which were the subject of the study: all face issues around the number of languages required in addition to English and all function within a highly complex and sophisticated marketplace.

Many of these studies also itemise the strategies which have evolved to overcome this barrier (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999; Feely and Harzing, 2003; Harzing et al., 2011). Feely and Harzing (2003) identify a range of formal and informal models by which companies can structure their approach to language use. They identify ‘functional multilingualism’ or the pragmatic use of a number of languages across a variety of functions, the use of external language resources, such as translators, staff training, the adoption of a single corporate language, the use of language nodes, or key personnel who become the channels of communication between different parts of a company, selective recruitment, expatriate or inpatriate managers, who also fill the role of ‘language node’, machine translation and finally the use of a controlled language as potential strategies which companies adopt to overcome the language barrier. Most recently, Harzing *et al*. (2011) tested these findings in their survey of German and Japanese companies and their subsidiaries and added further to the range of solutions available (fig. 1).

**Fig. 1 Solutions to the Language Barrier**

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| **Informal solutions** | **Bridge individuals** | **Structural solutions** |
| 1. Build redundancy in communication | 8. Bilingual employees (language nodes) | 4. Corporate language |
| 2. Adjust mode of communication | 9. Expatriation | 5. Machine translation |
| 3. Code switching | 10. Inpatriation | 6. External translators/ interpreters |
|  | 11. Non-native locals | 7. Language training |
|  | 12. Parallel information networks |  |

(Adapted from Harzing *et al.*, 2011: 281)

However, the apparent neatness of these findings often obscures a much messier reality. In spite of the evidence which emerges that language use does constitute a barrier in the conduct of business, and in spite of, or perhaps because of the plethora of available strategies for overcoming this barrier, the impression gained from many of these studies is that most companies adopt a policy of ‘muddling through’ (Andersen and Rasmussen, 2004: 231). Language training is not a frequently implemented solution (Crick, 1999; Harzing *et al.*, 2011) and instead companies relying on existing language skills (Crick, 1999), or even, particularly in the case of UK companies, avoid the issue ‘by reducing it to the problem of getting everyone to speak English everywhere’ (Maclean, 2006: 1383).

‘Speaking English everywhere’ is a solution which is increasingly frequently adopted, and not just in English-speaking companies. The increasing importance of the role of English as a lingua franca is documented at length within and alongside these studies of the management of language diversity (see e.g. Frederiksson et al, 2006; Ehrenreich, 2010). Harzing and Pudelko (2013) have established that ‘All companies that use a language other than the HQ language as a corporate language use English.’(Harzing and Pudelko, 2013:93). In this context therefore, English-speaking managers might expect to have an in-built advantage. This is certainly the perception which emerges from research on language use in the UK, which is discussed below and it is one which informs British business attitudes to foreign languages which are apparently, at best, ambivalent.

Language policies in the UK

Research interest in the topic of language skills for business in the UK was initially triggered by the establishment of the Single European Market in 1992. The unwillingness of British business to invest in language skills to trade with European partners is documented in a series of studies, many of which took the form of language audits of companies and sectors (Hagen, 2004), and which were often commissioned by lobby groups for languages such as CILT (the National Centre for Languages) and gained relatively little traction in the world of business. Research into language use in business in the UK has tended to focus on export performance in SMEs (Hagen, 1998; Crick, 1999). These studies identify both the need to sell in your customer’s language and British companies’ shortcoming in this area. In spite of Bristish business’s tacit assumption that mono-lingualism is an adequate response to global business, a recent report by James Foreman-Peck (2007) suggests that the British lack of language skills has an economic cost, estimating that the net loss to the British economy of a lack of investment in foreign language skills was a minimum of £9 billion in 2005. Dhir (2005) refers to language as being similar to a currency: just as prudent financiers trade in a variety of currencies, international companies should have a portfolio of different languages at their disposal (Dhir, 2005:364). Foreman-Peck takes this analogy further, seeing the language barrier as a tax on British businesses: ‘language is a barrier to trade, which can be represented as equivalent to a tax. There is evidence that Britain’s language investment is so low that it imposes a greater tax on British trade than the average for the rest of the world’ (2007:22). Paradoxically, however, he also concedes that ‘the market provides inadequate incentives for optimum investment in language skills for native English speakers’. Another recent detailed study by Feely and Winslow (2005) identifies isolated examples of what they identify as good practice in British companies, compared with their European counterparts. They established that British companies lag behind their European peers in terms of ‘language awareness, language management and, especially, in language responsiveness’ (Feely and Winslow 2005:6). The only area in which UK companies are comparable is in the field of preparedness: ‘UK companies believe they are ‘prepared’, because their ‘responsiveness’ to their clients or suppliers is based predominantly on the assumption that this response will be in English’ (Feely and Winslow 2005: 6).

However, in spite of the fact that English is now uncontrovertibly the language of international business, the few academic surveys of native English speakers in the international workplace bring evidence to suggest that British linguistic complacency may be misguided. Feely and Harzing, (2003), discussing strategies for overcoming the language barrier, described a reliance on English as a lingua franca as common but ‘fatally flawed’ (p.43). Dirk Maclean (2006) focuses specifically on the rise in the adoption of English as a corporate language in Europe and beyond. He too suggests that the underlying assumptions for this development, that the use of a single language promotes efficiency and that the use of English is in any case unavoidable, are flawed. This is borne out by the findings of Scandinavian researchers, none of whose findings suggest the imposition of a non-native language is unproblematic (Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999; Andersen and Rasmussen, 2004; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005; Lauring, 2006; Barner-Rasmussen and Aarnio, 2011). To support his arguments Maclean (2006) points to the findings of social language policy, this is increasingly moving away from the imposition of a single language, towards multi-language solutions. He also itemises a number of international initiatives where English now co-exists alongside a number of other languages and highlights language use on the internet, where use of Mandarin is growing more than four times as quickly than English and is poised to overtake it as the most frequently used language online. Most significantly, he suggests, the increase in the use of English by non-native speakers brings complications which may even put native speakers at a disadvantage. ‘English is coming to exist alongside a variety of cultural settings and contexts, so that the difficulties of communicating across cultures are now no longer between languages, but within a single language.’(MacLean, 2006:1384). This introduces a further layer of complexity which the mono-lingual English-speaking manager may be ill-equipped to deal with.

English as business lingua franca

These issues are discussed in an emerging body of literature which takes the debate beyond the issue of which is the most appropriate language and back into the realm of culture. Louhiala et al.discuss mergers between companies in Finland, Norway, Denmark and Sweden, where the merged company adopted English as the company lingua franca. The authors discuss the use of Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) within the company. BELF is used to denote the English spoken by non-native speakers and is a neutral and stripped down version of English spoken in international business. They show that in spite of the apparently neutral, and shared, communication code, participants in discourse bring not only ‘their own culture-bound views of how encounters should be conducted but also discourse practices stemming from their respective mother tongues’ (Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005:404). Their findings suggest that the use of a common language ‘by no means eliminated communication problems’ (Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005:417). These findings are mirrored in Rogerson-Revell’s (2007) study of what she describes as English for International Business (EIB) in meetings where both native speakers and non-native speakers of English are present. The use of EIB does not necessarily imply an advantage for native speakers. According to Kankaanranta and Planken, ‘English is not conceptualized as a language spoken in the United Kingdom ... but as an international code and operating language used at work, to do the work’ (2010: 400). Consequently participants and learners are not aiming at native speaker level proficiency but looking for simple, unidiomatic and simply phrased language. Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2011) further relativize the importance of English in their findings which suggest that interactional skills and rapport building are equally important. In consequence of these factors, paradoxically, native speakers are often at a disadvantage in international encounters (Maclean, 2006). This is confirmed anecdotally in the literature. The report *Talking World Class*, produced for CiLT in 2005 cites an instance where ‘Korean Airlines awarded a contract for flight simulators to a French supplier because the company’s negotiators spoke a clearer and more comprehensible English’.

In summary therefore, most academic work in this field originates in Scandinavia and deals with MNCs and their subsidiaries, while most work on the UK consists of evaluations of export performance. This paper aims to address a gap in existing literature by considering the extent to which the findings on language policy and communication strategies in MNCs also apply to companies based in English-speaking countries, in this case the UK. It also aims to investigate the extent to which English mono-lingualism is a viable proposition in international business today and to shed some light on the extent to which managers in UK MNCs are aware of or responsive to the issues raised in the European research.

The study

The paper documents the findings of a small pilot study of investment management companies based in the UK. Unlike the earlier language management studies discussed above where the focus is mainly on communication within the corporation, its focus is on speakers of English in companies whose business involves the establishment of joint ventures or partnerships in other markets or simply a capacity to conduct research to inform business decisions. As noted in the introduction, these companies typically emphasise their global reach and their intensive local research on behalf of their customers. Managers from four companies were interviewed. The respondents all worked in fund management: one (A) is a fund manager in an insurance and investment with responsibility for funds in Europe and in Asia; the second (B) is the head of the emerging markets desk in a international equity management company; the third (C) is a marketing manager in an independent investment partnership while the fourth (D) is a portfolio manager in an asset management company. The four managers themselves reported varying levels of foreign language expertise: respondent A speaks conversational French, C speaks fluent Japanese as a result of having lived and worked there for a number of years, B is a language graduate is fluent in several languages while respondent D is the only non-native speaker of English, and was fluent in his native language, English and two further languages. Semi structured interviews were conducted with all the respondents. Three of these were face to face and one, with respondent D, was conducted over the telephone. All were recorded and transcribed. The aim of the interviews was to establish at which point the company was required to conduct its business in a language other than English, how this was achieved, and what issues, if any, the use of English or the requirement to use foreign languages created for the companies. Since cultural distance and intercultural communication are frequently presented as the main issue for companies with an international reach in the Anglophone literature (Griffith, 2002), the respondents were also asked for their views on the importance of intercultural awareness.

In setting the context for language use, all of the respondents pointed to the fact that the dominance of English within the financial sector is underpinned firstly by international regulatory bodies which operate in English and secondly by the predominance of the New York and to a lesser extent the London Stock Exchange as drivers of English language use. Respondent A pointed out that all companies who seek listings in these markets and in Hong Kong have to use English. Respondent C also pointed out that most countries, for example Japan, now have regulatory rules about disclosure which must be in both English and Japanese and which must be adhered to. This means that there is apparently no incentive to access information in another language in order to get a competitive advantage in terms of information flow. All respondents therefore started from the general position that it was possible to conduct the vast bulk of their business through the medium of English and that foreign language skills were not required of them. Respondent D, a native speaker of an Eastern European language, confirmed this: ‘You can make an assumption that for everyone who speaks English quite well, there is no need to learn another language because you can make yourself understood anywhere.’ The general feeling was summed up by respondent A, who reported that there was ‘no resentment that these idiots can’t speak Japanese,’ but an acceptance that the biggest pools of capital were in the United States of America and other English speaking countries, and that therefore firms requiring investment accepted they had to use English.

However, further probing elicited a more nuanced picture. Given the stated reliance on English, the respondents were asked how they managed the situation when their interlocutor did not speak English. Respondent A reported that the solution was always an interpreter provided by the other company and this was echoed by the others. Respondent B would use an interpreter in China in situations where he felt his own Mandarin was inadequate. He made the further point that the lack of language skills was not necessarily perceived as a disadvantage, because it was possible to impress by a command of the issues and by showing due diligence: in other words the advantages which might be gained from language skills could also be gained by mastery of the technical knowledge. Respondent D noted that he would use interpreters in Russia or the Ukraine in encounter with people ‘who can’t or are unwilling to speak English.’

When respondents were asked if they ever encountered problems while relying on English in this way several issues were mentioned. Respondent A noted that the use of interpreters tended to inhibit question and answer sessions to the extent that they might be done equally well by email. He pointed out that the object of meetings is to gain a clearer understanding on his terms: ‘we rarely take a presentation from a company – we have questions we want answered and the meanders can be interesting. Translated meetings may prevent that.’ He also reported that he was aware on occasion that some of his conversations were reported inaccurately and he had to use his own knowledge to ‘read between the lines.’ Similarly, he noted that people often reverted to their own language ‘to be absolutely clear’. He qualified this by saying that given the complexity of the subject matter misunderstanding could equally have happened between two native English speakers.

The issue of the adequacy of English is also further compromised by the attitudes of the interlocutors. Respondent C reported that he had had experienced on several occasions that a meeting was held in English at the request of the other party, only for it to become apparent that their English was not adequate: ‘they may say at the start of the meeting please speak in English, and then ten to fifteen minutes in it becomes blatantly clear that they don’t speak any English and they’re just having a free English lesson. This has happened in several meetings I’ve had.’ This suggests that for some parties, the use of English has a meaning beyond simply being a vehicle for conducting meetings successful conduct of meetings and may be linked to face or status issues which may not be immediately apparent to the English speakers.

Three of the companies (A, C and D) mentioned having used external companies as translators where documentation had to be translated. Respondent D said that all translations were then checked for compliance by native speakers within the company. Company C reported problems with inaccuracies in translations: ‘In the past when they have used professional translators the feedback has been pretty poor. The translation is not always accurate, especially with Chinese translation’. To overcome this issue this company entered into a distribution agreement with a company in another South East Asian country. Part of the remit of the partner company was to provide reliable translating and interpreting services.

These findings suggest that English speakers are aware of the limitations of using English and that they use the range of formal and informal strategies already described in the literature to overcome them.

The respondents were asked when, if ever, they would consider using languages other than English. Here it became apparent that far from being the sole language used in negotiation, the companies acknowledged the need to use a range of languages in certain key activities. The practice in Respondent A’s company was that other languages were used mainly for ‘preliminary chit chat’ and the main business would proceed in English. The idea that using the local language acted as a social lubricant was taken further by respondent B, who confirmed that the use of the local language was essential in relationship building: ‘I conduct all meetings in Portugal in Portuguese. I can hand over a given sector, say banks, to a colleague, make the introductions and the relationships are his. He doesn’t speak Portuguese, but the relationships had already been made. That’s typical.’ Respondent D emphasised the need to speak the local language for sales: ‘in day-to-day relationships you would want someone who speaks [e.g.] French. They appreciate that or even require it.’ He also argued that speaking the local language gave a competitive edge: I cover the East European market, including Poland and Russia. I could do it with English only, but you can have better insights if you use the local language. You’re able to extract more information than using a third, common language.’ Respondent B, who learned Russian specifically because it was a difficult market, also claimed that speaking the local language gave a competitive advantage: ‘You get a disproportionately positive reception by speaking relatively little Russian and Mandarin. This enhances the relationship, because people are a lot less guarded when they’re able to speak.’ He cited the words of Nelson Mandela to support his own use of local languages: ‘If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart’.

 All respondents conceded that foreign language skills were required when dealing with smaller companies ‘off the beaten track,’ most frequently in Japan and in Chinese companies with an older CEO (respondent A). Respondent B also commented that there was less English ‘the further down the company you go’. Company A addresses this by using native speakers: ‘The Japanese small cap lady is a Japanese national, so she dealt with those companies which were off the beaten track in Japan. The small cap European equities lady is a French and German speaker, so if we downsize the kind of companies we’re investing in she can deal in the local language.’ Company B has the ability to function in eleven languages, while company C has native speakers of Japanese and Mandarin Chinese alongside UK nationals who speak these languages. Company D had a range of language skills at its disposal through native speakers and English speakers who speak another language. In summary therefore, although their formal position was that English was fully adequate for carrying out their business, all the companies spoken to in fact used a range of languages and a range of in-house language skills to achieve their aims.

The study also asked the respondents about their knowledge of intercultural issues in business and the extent to which they thought these ideas were helpful. All the respondents had some experience of or opinions on the importance of intercultural communication and there was a sense, perhaps reflecting their prominence in the business research, that unlike language use, these were a valid matter for consideration by companies. All of the respondents talked briefly of basic issues, such as the appropriate way to receive business cards. Two companies (A and C) had used external consultants to help with preparing culturally appropriate presentations. This contrasts with their reliance on largely informal arrangements for interpreting in meetings. Respondent A’s company had run a course in Sharia law and Sharia investment in preparation for a joint venture in the Middle East. This company also used a consultant to check presentations for cultural appropriateness. Overcoming cultural barriers was also one of the factors for company C entering into a distribution agreement with a partner in South East Asia. This respondent had also written a cultural briefing paper for colleagues, based on his first hand experience. Respondent B also stated that intercultural knowledge was extremely important and largely learned by experience or from the internet; ‘When I go to China, the first ten minutes of a meeting have to be giving them face, and telling them how greats the company is, etc. If I’m in Russia, it’s very important for me to, almost bordering on arrogance, tell them how important we are. In South Africa we talk about sport ... In a lot of countries it’s the relationship that matters most, so it’s important to establish rapport.’

Finally, in order to elicit thoughts on the general validity of the use of English, the respondents were asked whether in their view the dominance of English was likely to diminish in the foreseeable future. Respondent D answered this question tangentially in his comment about bankers in Russia and the Ukraine who ‘couldn’t or wouldn’t speak English’, suggesting that for this group at least, the use of English is linked to issues of national status and face. This insight was confirmed by the language graduate from company B. While hedging his response by restating the fact that the dynamics of business is driven by numbers, and the numbers, in terms of funds for investment, still favour the English speaking world, nonetheless he conceded that this situation was changing, and continued: What I would say is the following: I have over the last seventeen years detected increasing national pride, even bordering on chauvinism, in some countries, especially China and Russia. In China for example, some of the big state controlled companies are now saying we’re going to have our conference calls in Chinese. And we’ll have an English one later. We will publish our quarterly reports in Chinese only, and if you really want to find a way to know what’s going on you’ll have to find a way to read them.’ Again, the respondents concede, that in spite of their initial position, English alone is not sufficient in their business sector.

In view of the somewhat ambivalent view of the usefulness of foreign language skills which became apparent during the interviews, the respondents were asked what role played these skills played in the recruitment of graduates. Here the findings varied widely. Company B, where the manager was a languages graduate who spoke eight languages and made many points about the necessity of building relationships in the local language, stated categorically that his company does not recruit on the basis of language skills: ‘putting it crudely, most language graduates would not have the numerical skills to do the day job.’ This company recruits on the basis of degree results and prefers graduates in a finance-related discipline. Company A addresses the issue obliquely by hiring international recruits: ‘graduate intake is quite international, so even on a random basis the chances are that three would speak another language’. Here the emphasis is on rounded individuals who typically have international experience. He cited the hypothetical example of a notional recruit as someone who was born in Estonia, educated in Germany and then in the UK. In the company’s view, ‘these are bright, global thinking, interesting individuals who interview well and are tough to beat.’ Language skills are not the primary reason for recruiting them, but these individuals often have these skills.’ Similarly oblique strategies were used by company C, which hosted Japanese nationals in its UK office partly to serve Japanese clients and partly to learn about investment. Company C recruits ‘good people from any area.’ Language skills are valued but not a required component of an applicant’s skill set. Respondent C conceded that his Japanese language skills may have been a factor, but was keen to stress that other qualifications were equally, if not more important. Respondent D did not think his language skills were a factor in getting his job, but admitted ‘it helps a lot.’

Conclusions

Although this study was very limited and further research is required, several interesting findings emerged. Initial results confirm earlier research among European corporations. Language as a barrier and the concomitant language management issues were not something to which the companies had given a great deal of strategic thought. In terms of technical coping strategies there was a heavy reliance on native speakers, inpatriation and what Harzing et al (2011) called language nodes: skilled individuals who perform a pivotal role between a number of functions and individuals. Interpreters were routinely used, in spite of the acknowledged problems of lack of immediacy this created, and the onus of providing the interpreter, and thus the costs of overcoming the language barrier, was always given to the non English speaking party. The findings appear to support Feely and Winslow’s (2005) findings that UK companies score highly on preparedness, in that they expect English to meet all their needs. The belief articulated by respondent B, that professional knowledge could substitute for language skills, interestingly also reflects recent BELF research (Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen, 2010) which also suggests that know-how is as important as language accuracy in BELF transactions between non-native speakers. All the respondents conceded the importance of culture, but only one linked this to language use and pointed out the possible business and cultural implications of requiring your partners to conduct business solely in your language. This undoubtedly raises issues of face and power relationships which may not be visible to monolingual English speakers. This is an area which warrants further research.

The main new findings of the survey in relation to British companies were the dichotomy between the professed beliefs and the underlying practice which became apparent during the course of the interviews, and the value placed on language skills. All agreed that English was sufficient for conducting business, and then listed a series of issues and problems which arose as a result of conducting business monolingually and which generally had to be dealt with by the speakers of the other language. Additionally, while all accepted that intercultural skills had an important contribution to make to business, there was a strong impression, made explicit in some cases, that language skills were not taken seriously by British business and did not rank alongside technical skills in managers’ self perception. Those respondents whose language skills were greatest were the most likely to downplay their importance, suggesting that although they used these skills constantly, they did not see them as a valid part of their professional persona. The perceptions that languages were not important can be maintained by the fact that the financial sector recruits internationally and a company is likely to amass a range of language skills simply by virtue of this process, without having to make the requirement explicit. In this sense Maclean’s (2006) remark, that British companies deal with the language barrier by making everyone speak English, is taken a stage further: not only are their non-English speaking counterparts required to speak English, but non-native English speakers fill the gap left by the unwillingness of native speakers to acknowledge the importance of language. This ‘language blindness’ potentially has serious implications for the future competitiveness of British managers in the globalised economy.

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