

Hervé Didiot-Cook, Valérie Gauthier and Koen Scheirlinckx Language needs in business, a survey of European multinational companies

Working paper

Original citation:

Didiot-Cook, Herve, Gauthier, Valérie and Scheirlinckx, Koen (2000) *Language needs in business, a survey of European multinational companies*. HEC Paris, Languages and Cultures Department working paper, 725. Inter-faculty Group for Languages Joint Study Project, [Community of European Management Schools \(CEMS\)](#), Paris, France.

Originally available from [HEC Paris, Languages and Cultures Department](#)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/24729/>

Available in LSE Research Online: May 2014

© 2000 The Authors

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

**Language needs in business,
a survey of European multinational companies**

Hervé Didiot-Cook, Language Co-ordinator in French, LSE Language Centre

Valérie Gauthier, Professor of English, HEC, Director of the CREA
(Centre de Ressources et d'Etudes Anglophones)

Koen Scheirlinckx, Professor of Dutch, Université Catholique de Louvain-la-Neuve, Institut des Langues
Vivantes

CEMS Inter-faculty Group for Languages Joint Study Project
With the support of the CEMS Executive Office
October 2000

Content

Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

1. Background

- 1.2 Need for research
- 1.2 Objective

2. Methods

- 2.1 Abstract from the quantitative analysis
- 2.2 Semi-structured interviews
- 2.3 Framework of reference for expectations and language use
- 2.4 Survey and sample description

3. Findings

- 3.1 English as a global language
 - 3.11 Expectations for the level of English
 - 3.12 Uses of English
 - 3.13 The future use of English
- 3.2 Second foreign language
 - 3.21 Expected level
 - 3.22 Uses of second foreign languages
 - 3.23 Future trends
- 3.3 Communication skills: needs and emphasis
 - 3.31 General remarks
 - 3.32 Writing skills: level and uses
 - 3.33 Oral skills: level and uses
- 3.4 CVs and recruiting policies
 - 3.41 Expectations and emphasis
 - 3.42 The language of the CV
 - 3.43 Language testing and prerequisite assessments

4. Bibliography

Executive Summary

This survey of language needs was carried out to help create a better match between the actual use of foreign languages in their working environment and the training of future managers within the CEMS programme.

On the basis of a quantitative analysis and 34 qualitative interviews, we tested a number of key hypotheses. The results show that, when recruiting, companies expect at least an advanced level for English. Recruits have to be able to perform from day one. They should indeed have a solid knowledge of general business vocabulary.

Written English at an advanced level is considered a necessary skill, yet oral skills are even more valued by recruiters. Most companies expect an increase in the use of written English mostly for e-mail communication and reports as well as for research purposes. In reports, standards for the level of English are high.

Oral English is used in presentations, meetings and negotiations, again with high standards.

For the future, companies expect that English will become even more widespread when it is not yet at a peak. Globalisation and new technologies account for this trend.

A second foreign language is either required or a major plus. It is a significant sign of open-mindedness. The level can be lower than the one for English, but not when dealing with clients. Oral skills are far more important than written ones as the second foreign language is mostly used for meetings or negotiating with clients, and for solving local problems. For an expatriate, not speaking the local language is considered a lack of respect for the people and the culture, and this is unacceptable. Most companies expect that the use of a second foreign language will not increase, given the expansion of English, except in the UK.

For communication skills, it is not so much the techniques that matter since recruits will attend company training. Recruiters look for self-confidence as a determining factor. Candidates should be able to demonstrate basic communication skills and sufficient experience.

Regarding writing skills, e-mail is omnipresent. When writing informal e-mails, efficiency is more important than proper spelling and grammar, because it is considered written conversation. Formal e-mails, especially in the case of a first contact, have very high standards. Reports should also be free of mistakes. However, they should be synthetic and brief rather than in full text.

For the oral skills, presentation skills are crucial. Once graduates are on the job, meetings, negotiations and phone conversations are their most frequent tasks, although these skills are not always tested during recruitment.

The impact of new technologies on language use is that the need for better communication skills increases, especially writing skills (particularly e-mail) and proficiency in English.

In the CV, language skills should be clearly described under a separate heading, and supported by concrete evidence (courses, internships, living abroad). It is very important to provide honest and realistic information. The CV should be in English, possibly with a copy in the local or corporate language. Making the candidates perform tasks in different languages mostly tests the level of proficiency. Interviews are either in English only, or in English and the mother tongue.

1. Background

1.1 The need for research

For CEMS to be competitive in the global management education market, CEMS graduates must stand out from the mass. One of their distinguishing qualities is fluency and communicational skills in two foreign languages. These skills are tested before graduation, by means of oral and written exams. In both exams, the candidate is expected to demonstrate possession of adequate linguistic and communication skills to function effectively in an environment where the language concerned is used. The standard required to obtain a **Pass** mark in the CEMS Language Exams is high (C1 on the European Framework¹) and set in a professional

¹ ¹Council of Europe (1996) *Modern Languages: Learning Teaching, Assessment. A Common European Framework of reference*

context. Hence CEMS graduates must be able to perform certain important tasks at a level that is satisfactory in the eyes of Corporate Members, i.e. advanced or near native.

Languages within the CEMS programme are currently being reviewed. The language is under different kinds of pressure, both internal and external. The new CEMS curriculum (1999) has had a tremendous impact on languages. The set of internal pressures is described in the Quantitative Analysis available in Appendices. For external pressures, technological developments and profound changes in the environment in which multinational companies operate have played a great role. European integration with the establishment of a single currency by 2002, and the growing globalisation of world markets related to the increasing liberalisation of national and regional economies are amongst the major constraints faced by multinational firms in Europe. Over the last five years, electronic communications have encountered a phenomenal expansion, which has affected the way managers conduct business. Both sets of pressure (internal and external) seem to reinforce the necessity to assess the role of languages within the CEMS programme.

The Interfaculty Group for Languages (IFGL) in the CEMS has tried to find out what the exact expectations are in terms of language needs through informal talks with Corporate Partners and a quantitative analysis of students' performance during their CEMS internship². This enabled us to collect valuable information, i.e. that fluency in two foreign languages as well as communication skills at a high level, are very important when recruiting young managers.

However, we also learned that Corporate Partners have very diverging requirements, and the group was left with more questions:

- What is the exact level Corporate Partners expect? Are results of quantitative questionnaires reliable? Is there a difference between what recruiters ask, and what people really need for their job?
- English is increasingly the corporate language. Does this mean that special rules apply for the level of English?
- There has not been so far any hierarchy placed on languages i.e. the 'second' language is in no way more important than the 'third' language. Should we differentiate between the level of the two languages?

² See the separate report for the quantitative analysis based on a sample of internship evaluation sheets

- The CEMS has a shelf life for exam results: is this a necessity for companies, i.e. are recruits expected to operate effectively in foreign languages at the time of recruitment? Are results still reliable after two years and eight months?
- Are speaking and writing skills equally important? Have language needs changed with the use of new technology on the job, i.e. e-mail for instance?

1.2 Objective

Our aim was to obtain a realistic and detailed knowledge of language and communication skills requirements for recruiting and working in CEMS Corporate Members' organisations and other companies.

2. Methods

2.1 *Analysing the Internship Evaluation Forms*, an Abstract of the Quantitative Analysis³ conducted by Jo Iwasaki (LSE)

To obtain the structural knowledge of corporate partners' opinions about their needs in languages, it was felt that the best method was first to carry out a quantitative analysis in order to define a number of key hypotheses, which will be then tested through in-depth (semi-structured) interviews.

The evaluation forms of CEMS internships were selected as the sole source of analysis. Eighty-eight forms dated from 1993 to 1998 were gathered for this exercise. The project lasted from February to March 1998.

Based on the collected material, the study gives us some details and indications:

on the general 'background' of internships,

on companies which provide opportunities for internship,

on students and their performance assessed by companies which accepted them.

The following can be observed:

³ See separate report

- i) Students often carried out their internship in their second (or third) language.
- ii) English was chosen as one of the two foreign languages by nearly 100% students. Their second/third language was often German and French.
- iii) The type of industry in which students did their internship varied across countries.
- iv) The nature of jobs offered for interns and type of industry also appeared to be related. French and Spanish speaking firms most often offered students management positions.
- v) Internships on average lasted 3.4 months, and the vast majority did not exceed 6 months.
- vi) Students were evaluated favourably regarding their "*Social Abilities*" and "*Theoretical Knowledge*". They performed less well in "*Professional Knowledge*" which often required professional experience. Overall, it was commented that CEMS students performed better than non-CEMS interns did.
- vii) Companies were asked to assess separately language skills and communication skills. The results were perhaps surprising in that those with good language skills did not necessarily make good communicators.

From these findings, we were able to conclude that:

- a) Significant numbers of CEMS students carry out their internship for a fairly long period of time and in a wide range of industries,
- b) The importance of English is ever increasing, and the students are expected to perform at a 'near native' level,
- c) Students are, in general, assessed favourably. However,

- i) companies expect different levels of fluency in foreign languages, i.e. what companies define as a "very good" level in English might not equate with what they define as a "very good" level in French. Often companies tend to expect a greater degree of fluency in English than in other languages.
- ii) communication skills don't merely mean the ability to communicate in a language. As pointed out in the Guide to the CEMS language tests for examiners⁴, communication skills encompass a wide range of 'technical' abilities: "*focus on main objectives leading to the accomplishment of the task, coherence, logical development of ideas...*" as well as "*eye-contact, use/misuse of notes, ability to respond...*" This view seems to be supported by companies.

The above findings were presented to the Inter-Faculty Group Languages⁵ Meeting on 20th March 1998 in St Gallen, Switzerland. In general, the response to the paper was positive. It was felt that the findings helped to clarify a number of key issues previously discussed. The analysis seems to confirm past observations and some of their feelings. IFG L Delegates supported further research and more co-operation between Member Schools.

The next stage of enquiry will be that of qualitative, semi-structured interviews. With the help and strategic support of the CEMS Secretariat, the sampling of company representatives to be interviewed will be based on the findings of the Quantitative Analysis.

2.2 Semi-structured interviews

We used semi-directive interviews monitored by a professor and conducted by the professor and students, to investigate the correlation between expectations re. foreign language and communication skills needs and what really happens: how and when do people actually use the language, do they experience problems using the language when doing their jobs?

The results will be examined per country, sort of firm, activity, and influence of changing technology.

⁴ W.Obenaus u. a., Doing effective presentations in an intercultural setting, (Wien: Ueberreuter, 1998) p. 149 et al.

⁵ Also known under the acronym IFG Languages that will be used from now on in the text.

2.3 Framework of reference for expectations and language use

The following framework of reference was used during interviews to define the expected levels of language use.

Skills Levels	Presentation skills	Analytical skills	Interactive skills
1 Pre- intermediate	Writing Informing Confirming	Reading	Chatting
2 Intermediate	Defining aims and objectives Explaining Requesting Giving instructions	Comparing Analysing Choosing/selecting	Socialising Debating Networking (reporting/sharing information)
3 Advanced	Presenting a report	Proving something Promoting Justifying arguments Assessing	Dealing Making decisions Solving problems Being persuasive Handling complaints
4 Near Native	Training people Chairing a meeting	Advertising Recruiting	Negotiating Reaching a consensus Handling crises Resolving conflicts Making recommendations Implementing a strategy

2.4 Survey and sample description

The sampling options were based on the quantitative analysis carried out earlier. Random samples were drawn from companies which met certain criteria (being CEMS Corporate Partners or not, recruiting CEMS graduates, offering internships to CEMS students, located within reasonable distance from the authors of the study). Also the availability of interviewers was taken into account. As part of German samples, Dutch and Belgian samples were incorporated.

Segmentation per country and economic sector

UK: 14 interviews

Finance	Paribas Ltd. HSBC Bank Deutsche Bank PWC
Mass marketing	L'Oréal UK (2) Procter & Gamble
Manufacturing	Exxon UK SmithKline Beecham Coats Viyella ICI Siemens PLC
Other services	Reuters Unisys

Germany (3) and Benelux (3): 6 interviews

Manufacturing	Henkel Siemens AG BP Oil Europe (Belgium)
Mass Marketing	Beiersdorf
Food 1	Unilever (Belgium)
Service 1	Randstad (Holland)

France: 9 interviews

Finance	SG Paribas
Manufacturing	LVMH La Moncelle de Fonderies
Mass Marketing	L'Oréal
Consulting / Accounting	Arthur Andersen Gemini Consulting
IT	Nortel Networks
Food	Groupe Danone Unilever

3. Findings

3.1. English as a global language

3.11 Expectations for the level of English

The expected level of English does vary according to the recruiting position. For top management recruitment, the expected level for English is always at least advanced and often near native. This implies that young recruits have to perform on the job at a C1 or C2 level on the "Common European Framework of reference"⁶. More precisely, 4 out of the 29 companies surveyed expect a near native level, 19 companies require at least an advanced level and the remaining 6 require an intermediate level (B2).

All companies want their recruits to thrive in their corporate environment. They provide additional training sometimes to improve the level of English proficiency on the job.

Internationalisation in the business world means a high level of English for communication inside and outside the company. English is indeed often the official working language or the language for international communication and top management meetings and negotiations. Some companies are even moving towards English as their corporate language. Banks call it the language of the financial world.

In terms of general language proficiency, recruits should master a general business vocabulary. They can learn more specific terminology (technical, financial, commercial) on the job, but it is still important because precision gives them greater credibility.

For some companies language communication skills and self-confidence can compensate for some language skills deficiency, but this is rather the exception. Such exceptions are made for outstanding candidates who then attend training sessions upon arrival in the company.

For the segmentation per country, we notice that in all areas, the majority of the companies polled require an advanced level in English. This is slightly less acute in France and more emphasised in the UK.

⁶ Council of Europe (1996) Modern Languages: Learning Teaching, Assessment. A Common European Framework of reference.

The segmentation per economic sector reveals that services, which rely heavily on human contacts and communication, require an advanced level in English. In marketing, in the financial world and in IT services where negotiation and research in English on the net are an utmost priority, an advanced level is a minimum requirement. However, this point is not valid for all sectors. In accounting for instance, English is not a top priority. A pre-intermediate level may be enough, given that it will improve along with experience. Arthur Andersen Consulting in France for example expect a lower level of English for accounting, because they focus on the national market; they recruit exclusively on a national basis. Still, English skills offer opportunities for an international career, and they certainly become vital to rise too the top. PWC on the other hand expect a near native level of English for all their recruits in the UK with an exception for Asian graduates. With regard to the manufacturing sector there is no consensus over the level of English required: 7 out of 10 companies request an advanced or near native level and 3 are looking for an intermediate level only. In the food sector, Danone uses the local language and only wants advanced English in Anglo-Saxon countries. However, in the context of international meetings and negotiations all participants from the Danone staff must be proficient enough to partake in the meetings. Of course, in all those fields of activities, the required level depends on the position and role that are undertaken within the company.

3.12 Uses of English

Importance of oral and writing skills

When addressing the issue of oral and writing skills on the job, we find that those skills are either equally important, or there is a dominance of oral skills over writing. Yet, within a company, the writing and oral requirements vary from one job to another. Oral skills are often more significant because they are used more frequently on the job or because they are part of the company culture (as in l'Oréal for example). New Information Technologies are also influencing this issue, in so far as e-mails tend to make writing skills more important. In some companies, e-mail seems to have taken precedence over the phone. However, e-mail writing is a form of expression which is close to oral communication and shatters the rules of academic writing as will be discussed in the following point of this report.

Major uses of English

- **Writing**

There is more and more international **written** communication which is mostly in English. Written English is a means of communication, for instance through e-mails, memos and reports. It also represents a necessary tool to study data and documents from all over the world. More and more reports, minutes and corporate literature are only distributed in English, not to mention websites and Internet where English is overwhelmingly dominant. The impact of Internet and electronic communication on the uses of English is enormous. For instance, managers are now writing their own e-mails, memos, reports, and presentations. They have fewer assistants to help them translate reports, but they can use tools like spellcheckers...The organisation of office work has drastically changed in recent years with heavy implications for the learning and uses of English among managers and CEOs.

Standards for reports are very high. They cannot contain mistakes. On the other hand, there is a lot of tolerance towards internal e-mails: efficiency is far more meaningful than spelling or grammar mistakes. Getting to the point, conciseness and rapidity are now key criteria for e-mail communication, which, as a new and dominant form of writing is shaking the ground rules of language learning. However, for external communication, or when sending an e-mail to someone for the first time, things are different: there, the standards are much higher and e-mails must be carefully written with rules that are established with practice. Other technologies that increase the use of English are world-wide WANs, Intranets (e.g. Lotus) and ERP implementations (e.g. SAP). The training for these new technologies is also mostly in English.

The writing tasks which are most frequently mentioned by interviewees are: e-mails & memos (18), reports (12), reading and analysing information (9), training, courses (6). The latest trend seems to be the use of SMS, even to clients. It is important to note that for some companies a native speaker will always be called upon for specific and crucial tasks such as writing contracts, proposals, seeing a new client, etc.

- **Oral**

On the basis of our Framework of Reference⁷, it was found that the main uses of **oral** English are in presentations (20), meetings and negotiations (19), phone (11), teamwork (10), solving problems and conflicts, handling crisis (7), training and courses (5).

⁷ A specific framework of reference for level and tasks was designed for the purpose of this survey, see section 2.3

Presentation skills are often mentioned as essential. Indeed, most presentations and meetings are held in English. Consequently, managers must be able to both understand and speak English at a high level. Moreover, many courses and training programs are taught in English. It also happens that newly appointed managers are to participate in a project team where all the work is done in English. The ability to hold telephone conversations is also one of the most frequent requirements as regards oral English.

Some managers say that quick learners can pick up the required level rapidly on-the-job. The question of accent and pronunciation can be an issue for some while tolerance towards accent or oral mistakes is strong for others. What becomes essential then is to get your point across and be understood.

3.13 The future use of English

Half of the polled companies assume that English is bound to become even more important in the years to come. Almost all the others think it has reached a peak, and that the use of English will remain the same. There is the exception of Paribas, which recently merged with another French company so that the use of English is not perceived as a priority right now. Nevertheless, it is still assumed that English in this company will become even more important in the long run.

Technology and globalisation account for this greater importance: increased international communication, development of international business projects, implementation of world-wide communication systems. The national legislation, some mergers with companies from the same country, or a corporate structure focusing on an independent management of national markets explain the assumptions according to which the use of English will remain the same.

3.2 Second foreign language

“The spread of capitalism and the globalisation of English language now make it even more important to understand thoroughly the cultures in which we work. Understanding the multiculturalism of capitalism now

becomes a key business skill in my mind. Why do I say this? Because it is only by understanding the local culture that we will be able to manage and mitigate country risk.

I believe there is great opportunity, and indeed need, through language skills to enhance the understanding of business people of the many cultures of the world.” R.W. Neuman, Group Vice President BP Amoco.⁸

3.21 Expected level

On average, a second foreign language is required, or at least represents a major advantage. But when it is required, the level expected is generally very high, often as high as for English. In bilingual countries, like Belgium, the expected level for the other national language is higher than for English.

“The aim is to hire globally and to place globally. Knowledge of more than one language demonstrates that a candidate has the ability to think across cultural boundaries.”

Company spokesman, Diageo⁹

A third language bears evidence for the open-mindedness of a new recruit. It indicates flexibility, cultural sensitivity, and the willingness to move and learn languages. On the other hand, a company must not miss new talents because of their poor language skills. A clear statement was made about the fact that recruiting managers cannot be reduced to languages: “We are not hiring linguists”. Languages are sometimes less crucial for the selection; however they become essential as a determining factor for later career.

Expatriates who have to adapt to a new country need of course to master the second foreign language. Yet the level expected depends on the country and the position. In some cases, i.e. when the manager has to handle customers without the help of a native speaker, the language requirements are very high. It was found that the need for the local language varies with the field of activity of the company. It is higher for marketing, sales, in-the-field jobs, HR, while it is less relevant in finance for example. However expatriates are now generally expected to master the language of the country they work in no matter what their position is in the firm. Reasons for this are the notion of respect for the people and the culture, and the fact that language proficiency facilitates integration.

⁸ Nuffield Languages Inquiry Languages: the next generation, p 19

The expected level for the second foreign language is described by interviewees as "being professional or persuasive", "feeling confident", "daring to start a conversation", "playing an active role in a conversation".

Still, when we look at multinational companies and the large number of nationalities represented there it becomes obvious that managers are less likely to do presentations or deal in a second foreign language, most of the work being done in English.

It is important to note that for top managerial levels, the expectations for the oral levels in the second foreign language are significantly higher than for written ones.

The survey also reveals differences in the level expected, particularly concerning the second foreign language: CEMS-partners are mainly looking for open-mindedness while non-CEMS partners are most demanding as regards the second foreign language (though only when the applicant is to work abroad).

Sometimes a foreign language is needed for communicating with the main office. For example, communication between l'Oréal UK to l'Oréal France is in French and English. However, the use of French is rapidly diminishing in favour of English.

3.22 Uses of second foreign language

Writing is definitely less important than verbal communication when it comes to second foreign language use.

- ***Writing***

When writing is used, the most common tasks are memos: 3, E-mails: 3, Reports: 3, Research and analysis of information: 3

⁹ Nuffield Languages Inquiry Languages: the next generation, p 19

- ***Oral***

Still on the basis of our Framework of Reference¹⁰, it was found that oral communication is mostly used when dealing with customers and in negotiations (11). The second widest use is for cultural and integration purposes (7); then come presentations (6) and finally phone conversations (3) and resolving conflicts (3)

A special mention needs to be made for expatriates as their role and position involves a wider range of contexts for the use of second foreign language. Hence, the main uses for oral communication are:

- communication and negotiation with clients, agencies, suppliers, distribution
- networking, socialising
- explaining something to the local management
- coaching
- discussions with employees
- being able to understand, analyse and solve local problems
- handling complaints

Several companies say it is very important to be able to follow native speakers without problems, and to contribute to meetings.

As a result, the main differences in the expectations, as regards the second foreign language, are the formal and informal contacts with clients and the cultural aspect. It seems that the second foreign language is more customer-oriented, whereas English is also required to get some technical information, to communicate with other branches. Moreover, it enables managers to better understand the culture of a given country, to adapt to a new market, and it makes for better integration into a given society.

3.23 Future trends

The move towards further European integration will make the use of a second foreign language more important in the opinion of 6 companies, almost all of them in the UK. For other companies (Danone), the second foreign language will become more important because of internationalisation: international experience

¹⁰ See section 2.3

is required for seniors, and they want a very high level for the language skills (near native). Other companies expect more trilingual candidates to emerge.

Given the increase in the use of English as a global language, the majority of the companies interviewed think that the use of a second foreign language will not increase. Yet, they consider the fact that the development of call centres could account for a sustained need in the mastering of local languages. The need for this or that local language is diverse and depends on a wide range of factors such as economical, historical or social factors. (We will not explore the reasons for the observed needs, as this is not an issue for this report.) Hence, it was found that German seems to be in demand as well as Italian; Spanish and Portuguese are also expected second foreign languages for those aiming at the South-American market. There is also some interest for Japanese, Mandarin, Cantonese and Russian. Some companies have difficulties finding people who know less spoken languages, like Dutch. In all cases, it must be kept in mind that for career development, English remains paramount.

3.3 Communication skills: needs and emphasis

3.31 General remarks

In the interviews, few answers are really clear on the level expected in writing and oral skills. Indeed, it is not always easy to separate communication skills from language skills and they are often perceived as one and the same by recruiters. However, particularly at an advanced level for a given language, it is essential to make this distinction clear since a good communicator (either speaker or writer) makes a huge difference on the job. Indeed, a native speaker can be far less efficient than a non native because his or her communication skills are not developed enough while someone with an advanced or near native level will be far more efficient thanks to excellent communication skills and in spite of some language mistakes.

Paradoxically, only slightly more than half of the companies that clearly answered the communication skills question, actually demand good communication skills. But there is a simple explanation for this through the existence of numerous training programs aiming at improving the staff's communication skills. (Almost half of the companies mentioned such training programs). Yet, developing good communication skills takes much time, and as a result, many companies demand at least basic abilities in this field. Once applicants have such a basic level, it is assumed that they can improve quickly, provided they have some self-confidence.

3.32 Writing skills: level and uses

Among all writing skills, e-mails represent the most basic requirement for written communication skills. As mentioned above, e-mail is a very interesting, new and daily mode of communication which stands between oral and writing skills up to a point where interviewees will talk about it under the heading of "writing skills" while presenting it as "conversation" or "dialogue". Yet the attitude towards e-mails is somewhat ambivalent. Internal e-mails often use casual English where being concise more important than being correct. However, as mentioned before, e-mails to people outside the company, top-management or to someone for the first time have higher standards: either none or very few mistakes are allowed and the wording must be more formal and polite. Problems do arise when the two types of e-mail writings are mixed.

Report writing is another skill frequently mentioned by companies; good reports rely on the ability to select information and present it in a synthetic and accurate way. The message has to be to the point and concise. The format is becoming close to that of a presentation where one idea is one line. Indeed, much of the writing that managers now do happens during the preparation of presentations. While being sometimes quite long (20-30 pages), reports then lend themselves to oral presentations.

For instance, at Gemini consulting, a candidate is expected to be sufficiently fluent in English to be able to write an up-to-20-page report on any topic. HSBC Bank wants their recruits to write and implement business plans after their training in the company. Two companies want them to write proposals and contracts.

The interviews also highlight the importance of the knowledge of business and financial English, even though the words can be learnt quickly on the job. When known prior to recruitment, the concepts and definitions of technical terms, as well as the ability to read and quickly understand scientific documentation, is a definite asset for young managers. However, for documents which play a strategic role in the functioning of the company such as proposals or contracts, mistakes would lead to a loss of credibility, and thus are unacceptable. Therefore, for such strategic documents, the company almost always resorts to a native speaker for security.

Then, the need for writing skills in a foreign language often depends on whether there is a native, or someone more experienced in the company to read and correct official written material. When this is not the case, the recruits must be near native and competent in both general and technical registers.

As far as economic sectors are concerned, we found that more reading and writing skills are wanted in consulting and finance than in any other sector. For marketing, where creativity plays an important role, a higher level of mastery is expected for the wording of slogans and other forms of written communication.

3.33 Oral skills

Presentation skills are very often described as an essential basic skill. It is a means of showing confidence and making a professional impression, and an indicator of performance and quality. As for a first e-mail, giving a presentation or making a first contact by phone is considered crucial for new recruits on the job. A recurring comment about presentations concerns the fact that recruiters favour good oral communication skills, not so much for the technical dimension of business presentations, but more so because they are a sign of self-confidence and poise.

With oral communication, new technologies also lead to new needs, such as the knowledge and mastering of PowerPoint, which is becoming the standard tool for business presentations today. Here again, when the young manager masters such tools as PowerPoint prior to entering the firm, it is a definite plus. Other elements of current evolution involve an expected increase in the use of videoconferencing to cut costs for example between distant subsidiaries, but also for research and development or even for daily communication. It was also noted that call centres expand the use of the phone. Therefore, phone communication (which is rarely taught in initial training and almost never tested) is becoming a very important skill to be developed early in education.

As far as economic sectors are concerned, oral skills are obviously more in demand in marketing, commercial functions and product development.

3.4 CVs and recruiting policies

3.41 Expectations and emphasis

Most companies have application forms with a separate section for languages. Unilever for instance has:

- levels: excellent - good - satisfactory- basic
- languages: English - French - Dutch - other
- skills: reading - writing - speaking - listening

Sometimes they only look at these application forms, and never at CVs. Other companies get almost all of their applications through their website.

English at an advanced level is almost everywhere a requirement for top management positions, even for local jobs. For some companies, the assessment centres for recruiting are in English. There, they sometimes see talent that is not expressed, through teamwork, because language skills are missing.

In the CV, languages must be mentioned clearly in a separate section or with IT skills. Otherwise it is assumed that there are none. But before all, one third of the companies polled demand that applicants prove their level by accurate data of any kind, e.g. long stays abroad, standardised tests, exchange programs, internships, professional experience, post-graduate degrees, MBAs, foreign parents... Candidates having taken on language courses show proof of not being afraid to take initiative.

3.42 The language of the CV

English is clearly the most demanded language for a CV (17); second comes the language of the company where one is applying (4) and for the remaining companies (3) no specific language is required. Companies mostly expect CVs in English for international careers, possibly with a copy in the local or corporate language.

3.43 Language testing and prerequisite assessments

Testing the language is done in non-language tests, performing tasks in different languages or with specific language tests. The interviews are mostly done in English (13), partly also in the mother tongue (8). The interviews also stress the importance of honesty in CVs. As a matter of fact, languages often represent for employers a way to assess an applicant's honesty. It is important to note that those who write on their CVs that they have an excellent level in a given language have a higher chance of being assessed in this language during the interview. As regards standardised tests, they represent a plus, and sometimes a requirement (TOEIC score for some companies). When needed, companies generally have their own assessment centres.

4. Bibliography

Alford, Douglas (1998) *Training and Education: vocationalism and modern languages (Part 1)* Languages Forum Vol. N. 4. London: University of London Institute of Education.

Community of European Management Schools (1999) *Annual Review 1999*. Jouy-en-Josas: CEMS European Office.

Council of Europe (1996) *Modern Languages: A Common European Framework of reference*. CC- LANG (95) 5 rev. IV Strasbourg: Council for Cultural Co-operation

Hagen Stephen Ed. (2000) *Business communication across borders, A study of language use and practice in European companies*. London: CILT.

Languages National Training Organisation (2000) *The National Language Standards 2000*, London: CILT.

Languages National Training Organisation (2000) *The National Language Standards in action: Examples and Case Studies in Business and Employment*, London: CILT.

Nuffield Languages Inquiry (2000) *Languages: the next generation*. London: The Nuffield Foundation.

Obenaus, Wolfgang u.a. (1998) *Doing effective presentations in an intercultural setting*. Vienna: Uberreuter.

Weber, Stephen L. (2000) *Trade talks? Language lessons for commerce and industry*. London: CILT.