

# **Strategic Communication Across Languages in Business Environments: A study of the Language Management Strategies of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises on the Island of Ireland**

## **Abstract**

There has been little research focussing on how Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), particularly those in Anglophone contexts, approach language management with a resultant lack of understanding hindering language policy making at national levels. Therefore, this study assessed the extent to which a sample of 38 SMEs, 15 in the Republic of Ireland (RoI) and 23 in Northern Ireland, have a Language Management Strategy (LMS), that is, a plan of action enabling them to communicate across languages with suppliers and/or customers abroad. The survey also explored the attitudes of the SMEs toward adopting a strategic approach to language management focussing on four interrelated elements: First, whether the SMEs felt they needed an LMS, second, how effective they regarded their communication with speakers of languages other than English to be, third, their views on whether they had missed a business opportunity owing to a lack of language capacity, and fourth their perceptions regarding whether language was a factor in choosing export markets or suppliers. The results indicate that 16% of the SMEs report having an LMS, 33% of those in the RoI and 4% of those in NI. The analysis of the responses further revealed that 45% of all respondents engaged, in some form, with languages other than English, albeit often in an apparently ad hoc manner. The paper discusses the findings and considers the supports and policy initiatives likely to assist SMEs in developing LMSs in these predominantly Anglophone (European Union and non-European Union) contexts.

## **Résumé**

Il n'y a pas beaucoup de recherche sur la façon dont les petites et moyennes entreprises (PMEs), en particulier celles des contextes anglophones, traitent de la gestion des langues. Cela entrave l'élaboration des politiques linguistiques au niveau national. Cette étude cherche à savoir si 38 PME, 15 en République d'Irlande (RoI) et 23 en Irlande du Nord, ont une stratégie de gestion linguistique, c'est-à-dire un plan d'action leur permettant de communiquer avec des fournisseurs et / ou des clients à l'étranger dont la première langue n'est pas l'anglais. L'enquête a également examiné les attitudes des PME à l'égard de l'adoption d'une approche stratégique de la gestion des langues axée sur quatre éléments interdépendants: premièrement, si les PME estimaient avoir besoin d'un LMS, deuxièmement, l'efficacité de leur communication avec des locuteurs de langues autres que l'anglais, troisièmement, s'ils avaient manqué une opportunité commerciale en raison d'un manque de compétences linguistiques, et quatrièmement, si la langue était un facteur dans le choix des marchés d'exportation ou des fournisseurs. Les résultats indiquent que 16% des PME ont un LMS, 33% de celles de la République d'Irlande et 4% de celles de l'Irlande du Nord. L'analyse des réponses a en outre révélé que 45% de tous les répondants s'engageaient, sous une forme ou sous une autre, avec des langues autres que l'anglais, bien

que souvent de manière apparemment ad hoc. Nous analysons les résultats et nous examinons les soutiens et les initiatives politiques qui pourraient aider les PME à développer une stratégie de gestion linguistique.

### **Key words**

Language Management, Language Management Strategy; Language Policy; Republic of Ireland; Northern Ireland; International Business, Internationalisation, Small and Medium sized Enterprises

### **Mots clés**

Gestion des Langues, Stratégie de Gestion des Langues; Politique linguistique; République d'Irlande; Irlande du Nord; Commerce international, internationalisation, Petites et Moyennes Entreprises

### **Introduction**

A common misperception in contexts where English is an official language is that 'English is enough' to trade successfully with countries whose first language is not English. However, studies on the experiences of European Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) repeatedly conclude that, while a high level of proficiency in English is a prerequisite for success, there are many contexts where English alone is insufficient and a lack of capacity in other languages results in significant loss of business (see for example Coussins 2017; Expert Group on Future Skills Needs 2012; Hogan-Brun 2017a, 2017b; Incelli 2008; Rižnar and Kavčič 2017; Strubell and Marí 2013).

The European Commission (2011: 57) argues that knowledge of several languages can make the difference between an average performance internationally and an exceptional one. In support of this argument, the Austrian *Institut für Bildungsforschung der Wirtschaft* projected the future language needs of Austrian companies to include Italian, Czech, Slovak and Hungarian in addition to English (European Commission 2011: 16).

The purpose of this study is to uncover the extent to which SMEs in the predominantly Anglophone contexts of Northern Ireland (NI) and the Republic of Ireland (RoI) have strategies in place to facilitate communication across languages. A second objective is to shed light upon the attitudes of SMEs in both contexts towards the development of such strategies.

### **Language Management Strategies: Research context and definition**

The study of LMSs takes place at the intersection of applied linguistics, sociolinguistics and international business management. It can also be viewed as operating at the nexus of language policy and planning (Sanden 2014), and the strategic internationalisation of organisations and enterprises (Tenzer, Terjesen and Harzing 2017: 824). An LMS has been

defined in a number of ways, including:

‘The planned adoption of a range of techniques to facilitate communication with customers and suppliers abroad’ (European Commission 2006: 4),

...a plan of action designed to address the issue of ‘how best to manage communication across the language barrier’ (Feely and Harzing 2003: 38), and

‘Formulating and adopting a package of measures to deal with international linguistic and cultural barriers before they arise’ (European Commission 2011: 13).

Much of the early work on LMSs has taken place in the context of Multinational Companies (MNCs) (Feely and Harzing 2003; Needal and Kaplan 2014; Sherman, Carl, Engelhardt, Balogh and Balla 2010) and has focussed on identifying taxonomies of language management tools and techniques.

### **LMSs in SMEs**

The role of language in the development of SMEs has been under-researched to date (Tenzer, Terjesen and Harzing 2017: 839). Significant exceptions include two large-scale studies conducted by the European Commission: the ELAN (Effects on the European Economy of Shortages of Foreign Language Skills in Enterprise) and the PIMLICO (Promoting, Implementing, Mapping Language and Intercultural Communication Strategies) Studies, completed in 2006 and 2011 respectively. Their focus was on the identification and analysis of exemplars of best practice in the design and implementation of LMSs (European Commission 2011: 3).

The ELAN Study (European Commission 2006) surveyed 1964 European SMEs, identifying four characteristics of those who perform well internationally: the employment of native speakers, the use of employees with language skills, the use of interpreters and translators, and the development of an LMS. The results of the ELAN Study indicated that the SMEs who engage in these activities earned 44.5% more from export sales than those that did not as well as achieving significant gains in productivity (European Commission 2011: 11-12). The results also indicated a lack of well-developed LMSs in SMEs and revealed that at least 11% of the SMEs had lost a contract owing to a lack of language skills (European Commission 2006: 5).

The findings from the ELAN study were used to identify SMEs to serve as examples of best practice for the PIMLICO study (European Commission 2011: 3). The 40 SMEs selected had achieved significant trade growth after developing and using an LMS and had five characteristics in common (European Commission 2011: 3-5):

1. Functional capability across at least three foreign languages including English.
2. High-level competence in English
3. Ability to operate globally and adapt to differing linguistic demands

4. Use of local agents to address linguistic and cultural issues
5. Internationalisation underpinned by HR strategy according to which SMEs keep comprehensive records of their staff's language ability and put it to good use, employ native speakers; arrange linguistic and cultural training; employ professional translators and interpreters; adapt their websites to other cultures, and work in partnership with universities to hire language support.

The results of the ELAN Study (European Commission 2006) also indicated that 48% of European SMEs had an LMS in place. There remains, however, a lack of more recent data around LMSs in European SMEs. The information gap is particularly significant in the United Kingdom (UK), which includes NI, and the RoI. What limited evidence there is suggests a lack of LMSs in the SME sectors in the UK and the RoI. The ELAN Study, for example, indicated that 1% of RoI SMEs had a formal LMS in place and 3% of UK SMEs. The purpose of the following study is to begin to address this information deficit.

## **Study**

### *Background and Context:*

The RoI and NI are both located on the island of Ireland, with the RoI an independent country and NI a member of the United Kingdom (UK) alongside England, Scotland and Wales. The RoI is a member of the European Union while NI, along with the rest of the UK, has recently departed the EU as part of a process popularly known as 'Brexit'. The departure of the UK from the EU means that the RoI and Malta are the only countries in the EU in which English is an official language.

English was introduced to the island of Ireland in the late twelfth century. It became the dominant language over a period of more than eight centuries, a process characterised by colonisation and a rise in the status of the language (Kallen 2012). Following partition of the island of Ireland in 1922, the RoI retained two official languages, English and Irish (spoken as a first language by 3% of the RoI population). English is the de facto official language in NI and is spoken by approximately 99% of the population. It exists alongside two regional languages with official recognition, Irish and Ulster Scots (Judge, 2007). Thus, considering the status of English on the island of Ireland through the lens of Kachru's (1985) model of World Englishes could lead us to conclude that NI represents an 'inner circle nation' or a country where English is spoken as a first language and the RoI as placed somewhere between 'inner circle nations' and 'outer circle nations'. This is owing to the fact that 'outer circle nations' in Kachru's model are those in which English is one but not the sole official language. This criterion does indeed apply to the RoI. However, English is by far the more dominant of the RoI's two official languages.

The study of both English and Irish is compulsory in the RoI education system until the final School Leaving Certificate taken at approximately age 18. The study of English is compulsory in NI. The study of an additional foreign language is not obligatory in either

the RoI or NI..However, foreign languages are offered by approximately 55% of primary schools in NI and 90% of secondary schools (British Council Northern Ireland 2019) although NI is experiencing an ongoing decline in numbers studying a language as students progress through secondary school (British Council Northern Ireland 2019). In the RoI, approximately 90% of students study a foreign language in the Junior Cycle (until the age of 16) and approximately 70% until the School Leaving Certificate. Only approximately 4% of students study a foreign language at university level in the RoI and approximately 3.5% in the UK as a whole (Bruen 2021; UCAS 2017).

Increased inward migration into the RoI in particular in recent years has resulted in the diversification of its linguistic profile. Approximately 13% of the population now speak a language other than Irish or English at home (Central Statistics Office 2017). This compares with a figure of approximately 3.1% in NI in 2011 (Statista 2021). However, foreign language competency in both the RoI and NI continues to remain below the EU average (Eurostat 2018). Thirty percent of those aged between 25 and 64 in the RoI, and 20% in the UK (including NI) report knowledge of an additional foreign language compared with an EU average of 35%.

In 2017, the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) expressed their view that a lack of foreign language competence is leading to “unquantifiable missed opportunities” for Irish exporters. The confederation stressed that for many SMEs “it is a question of not knowing what they don’t know” and that SMEs “tend to not even consider markets where they perceive language and cultural differences are an entry barrier” (Department of Education and Skills 2017: 36). Similarly, the Institute for Management Development’s (2019) World Talent Ranking ranked the RoI in 46<sup>th</sup> place in 2018 with regard to the extent to which foreign language skills are meeting the needs of enterprises with the UK ranked 48<sup>th</sup>.

Acknowledging widespread issues with foreign language capacity across Irish (RoI) society and the Irish economy, the Irish government published its first strategy for foreign languages-in-education, *Languages Connect: Ireland’s Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2022* (DES 2017). Its (DES 2017: 8-11) objectives include:

1. Enterprise agencies and enterprise representative groups to encourage SMEs to implement an LMS appropriate to their markets.
2. Further Education and Training and Higher Education providers to ensure the concept and purpose of an LMS is well understood and introduced into Master of Business Administration courses and other Executive Education programmes.

The lack of data on LMSs in the RoI is further evidenced by the fact that the baseline figures in this strategy are articulated as ‘to be established’ (Table 1) with no mid nor end term targets set.

**Table 1: Measurables for delivery in relation to LMSs in RoI SMEs**

MEASURE	BASELINE (2016)	MID TERM TARGET	END TARGET
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		(2022)	(2026)
Percentage Of Employers Reporting Use Of Language Management Strategies	To be established		
Number Of Education And Training Providers Incorporating LMS Into MBA And Other Executive Education Programmes	To be established		

DES (2017: 38)

In order to address issues around foreign language capacity in NI, a Northern Ireland Languages Strategy was published in 2012 (Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies, Department of Education 2012). This strategy acknowledged that concerns about a lack of foreign language capacity, ‘apply to an even greater extent to Northern Ireland, given [our] position on the edge of Europe and the need to develop [our] economy and to enhance [our] international trading...’ (Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies, Department of Education 2012: 1-2).

The strategy also references NI’s ‘strong dependence on English speaking markets in Britain, Ireland and North America, and a relatively low proportion in European Union countries’. While LMSs are not mentioned explicitly, the strategy recommends (2012: 8): ‘that the private and voluntary sectors be supported in carrying out audits of their language and intercultural needs; that language programmes for occupational purposes be included in the training provision within these sectors and that employers be encouraged to provide language training opportunities, to recognise that languages are a skill priority, and be given incentives to reward language competence’. The strategy highlights a finding by the British Chambers of Commerce<sup>i</sup>, based on a survey of over 8000 businesses, that 61% of non-exporting companies, who would be likely to consider trading internationally, consider a lack of language skills to be a barrier to doing so (Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies, Department of Education 2012: 41-42).

### *Research Questions*

This study addresses the following questions:

1. To what extent do SMEs in the RoI and NI have an LMS?
2. What are the attitudes of RoI and NI SMEs towards the development of an LMS?
3. What additional supports would assist RoI and NI SMEs in developing LMSs?

### *Sample and Procedure*

38 SMEs, 15 based in the RoI and 23 in NI, participated in this study. All of the SMEs were attending *Small Firms Growth Executive Education Programmes* delivered by an University based in the RoI between April and December, 2019. In each case, as part of a workshop on *Readiness for International Growth*, the Chief Executive Officer/Senior Manager of each SME was invited to complete a survey (Appendix A) designed for the purpose of this research.

The SMEs ranged in size from 21 to 243 employees and were drawn from the following sectors: Manufacturing; Water Supply, Sewerage, Waste Management and Remediation Activities; Construction; Wholesale and Retail Trade; Transportation and Storage; Information and Communication; Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities; and Administrative and Support Service Activities<sup>ii</sup>. Participation in the study was voluntary and the SMEs were not required to identify themselves nor indicate the size of their workforce. However, where they did so voluntarily, information on size and sector was included in the data analysis and anonymised in line with institutional research ethics requirements<sup>iii</sup>.

### *Instrument Design*

The survey contained six questions (Appendix A) designed to address the three research questions outlined above). In order to generate data for both quantitative analysis and in-depth qualitative analysis, a combination of closed, scaled and open-ended questions was used.

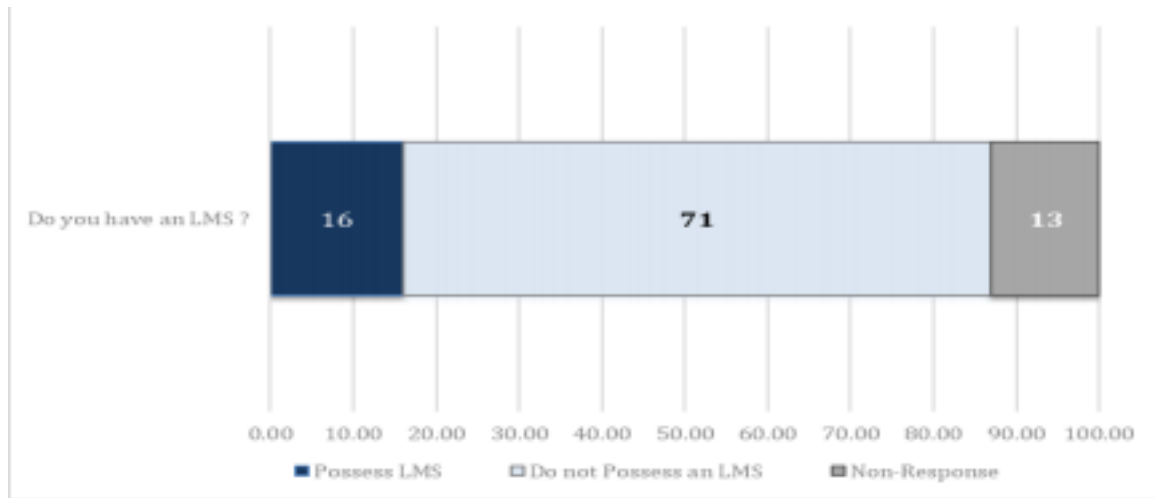
### *Data Analysis*

The data was analysed using a combination of thematic content analysis and quantitative analysis. Thematic content analysis facilitated the identification of significant themes within the qualitative data (King and Brooks 2018) and was therefore appropriate for the analysis of responses to the open-ended questions. Frequency analysis using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) and specifically Pearson's Chi Square test of independence was used to analyse the nominative and ordinal quantitative data generated.

## **Results**

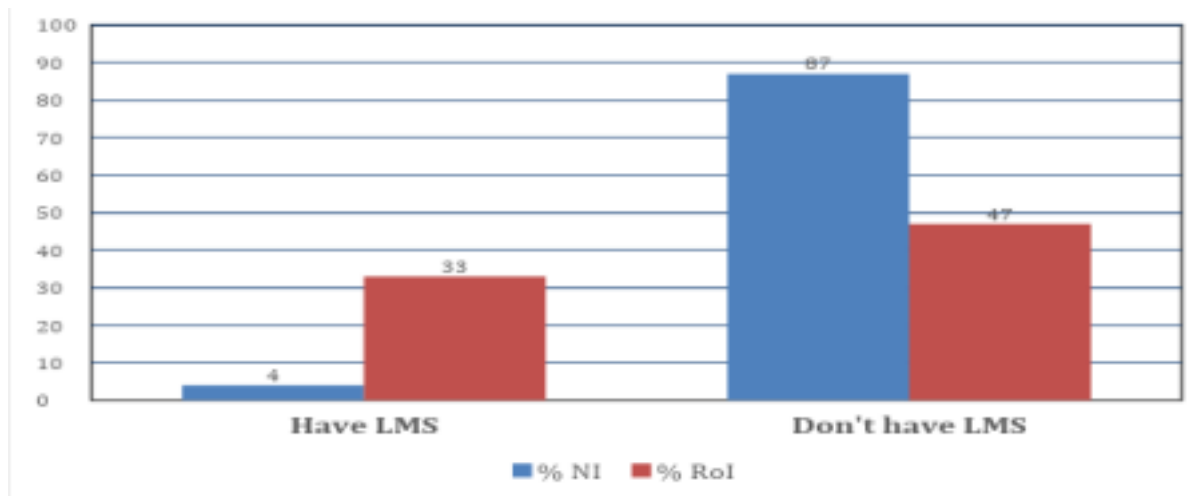
Based on their responses to a direct question concerning whether or not their company had an LMS<sup>iv</sup>, six of the SMEs who participated in this study (16%) stated that they have an LMS while 27 (71%) responded that they do not with 5 (13%) non responses (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: SME's responses (%) regarding whether they have an LMS**



Significantly more of the RoI SMEs reported having an LMS compared with the NI SMEs ( $X^2=6.991$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $r=.008$ ) (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: SME's responses regarding whether they have an LMS by location**



However, deeper analysis of the SMEs' responses to an open-ended question concerning how they communicate with customers and suppliers whose first language is not English suggests that the situation is more complex and that the participating SMEs can be divided into two categories, the first containing SMEs who engage in some way with foreign languages and the second containing those SMEs who do not (Table 2). The analysis of this data indicates that 45% of the SMEs surveyed engage in some way(s) with one or several languages other than English, while 55% do not.

**Table 2: SME engagement with foreign languages: Towards an LMS**

Category	Characteristics	RoI	NI	Sub Total	Total
		% of SMEs	% of SMEs		
<b>Engages with Languages other than English</b>	Uses one or more of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Professional translators;</li> <li>● Translation tools;</li> <li>● Local agents</li> <li>● Intermediaries</li> <li>● Employees who speak a language other than English</li> </ul>	66%	30%	<b>45%</b>	<b>55%</b>
<b>Uses English Only</b>	Only engages with the English-speaking world	7%	17%	<b>13%</b>	
	Engages beyond the English-speaking world but assumes that everyone speaks English fluently and makes no particular accommodation for those who do not.	20%	30%	<b>26%</b>	
	Employs non-linguistic strategies, e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Uses plain English</li> <li>● Avoids jargon and technical language</li> <li>● Follows up verbal communication with written email</li> </ul>	[13%] <sup>y</sup>	26%	<b>16%</b>	

Of the SMEs who engage with a language other than English, 13 refer to a single foreign language tool or technique, three report using two and one reports using four. The techniques were, in order of frequency of mention, the use of local agents, the use of translators and/or translation tools, the use of the language skills of existing staff, the use of interpreters, and the hiring of staff with language skills. The use of translators and/or translation tools was the most commonly mentioned technique by RoI SMEs while the use of local agents was the technique most commonly employed by both groups.

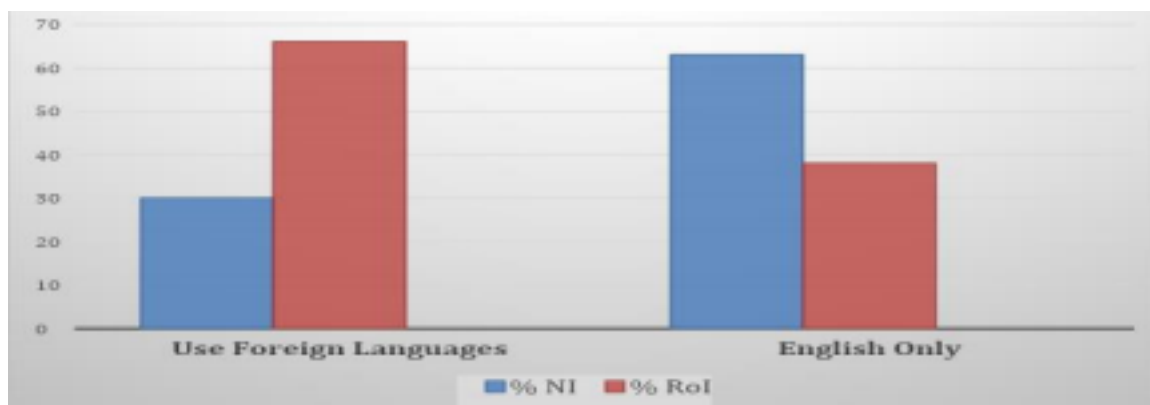
Within the cohort identified as not engaging with languages other than English, some differentiation can still be identified with no significant differences emerging between NI and RoI SMEs in this regard. For example, five of the SMEs surveyed do not engage outside of the English-speaking world. Ten SMEs engage beyond the English-speaking world but

make no allowance for the fact that others may be communicating through a language that is not their first language. Six communicate through English at all times but are aware that their interlocutors are not speaking their first language. This subgroup engages in communicative strategies to aid understanding such as using plain language, avoiding jargon, and following up on oral interactions with written (often email) summaries of the key points covered.

There was no evidence of obvious workforce size or sectoral differences (at NACE levels 1 or 2) in relation to the use of foreign languages or otherwise. Three of the participating SMEs did emphasise in their qualitative responses that English was the norm in their particular sectors (manufacture of computer, electronic and optical products; architectural and engineering activities; manufacture of textiles). Of these, two, nonetheless, continued to describe language as a key factor in their choice of suppliers and/or export markets (discussed in more detail in the analysis of the data relating to Research Question 2 in the following section).

Statistical analysis by location also reveals that significantly more ROI than NI SMEs engage, in some way, with languages other than English ( $X^2 = 4.821$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=.028$ ) (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Percent of SMEs who engage with foreign languages & % SMEs who use English only by location**



Four interrelated elements were considered in exploring the SMEs attitudes towards the development of LMSs. These were as follows:

1. Whether or not the participants felt they needed an LMS
2. How effective they regarded their existing communication with speakers of languages other than English to be
3. Their views on whether or not they had missed a business opportunity owing to a lack of language capacity, and
4. Their perception of whether or not language was a factor in choosing export markets or suppliers.

Table 3 contains an overview of the results for each of the four elements.

**Table 3: Attitudes towards LMSs**

<b>Statements</b>	<b>Yes</b>		<b>No</b>			
We need an LMS.	<b>39%</b>		<b>50%</b>			
	NI	RoI	NI	RoI		
	26%	60%	65%	27%		
Our communication is effective with those whose mother tongue is not English.	<b>Not true of me (0-3)</b>		<b>Neutral (4- 6)</b>		<b>True of me (7-10)</b>	
	<b>11%</b>		<b>24%</b>		<b>59%</b>	
	NI	RoI	NI	RoI	NI	RoI
	13%	7%	26%	20%	57%	60%
We have missed opportunities owing to lack of language capacity	<b>50%</b>		<b>21%</b>		<b>21%</b>	
	NI	RoI	NI	RoI	NI	RoI
	39%	67%	35%	0%	28%	20%
Language has influenced our choice of export markets/suppliers	<b>39%</b>		<b>13%</b>		<b>42%</b>	
	NI	RoI	NI	RoI	NI	RoI
	43%	33%	17%	4%	39%	47%

### *Need for an LMS*

39% of SMEs reported that they needed an LMS and 50% that they did not, with 11% not responding to this question. However, a significantly higher percentage of RoI SMEs than NI SMEs expressed the view that they needed an LMS ( $X^2=5.384$ ,  $p=.020$ ,  $df=1$ ). Significant positive relationships were also identified between the extent to which SMEs already engage with foreign languages and their views regarding the extent to which they need an LMS ( $X^2=7.201$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=.007$ ).

The reasons given by the SMEs for needing an LMS reflect a general sense of future need with a representative comment being, 'We don't have one but we feel we need one.' (NI)

There was a focus in the responses on the fact that particular markets would require an LMS, although in most cases, these markets were not specified. The limited number of

markets explicitly specified included Asia and the Welsh market:

Those SMEs who responded that they did not need an LMS did not elaborate beyond comments such as, 'Don't think we need it.' (NI). 'We haven't had the need.' (RoI)

One NI SME explained their lack of need for an LMS as arising from their focus on the domestic market.

### *Effectiveness of existing communication with non-English speakers*

The majority of the SMEs (59%) were of the opinion that their communication with customers and suppliers whose first language was not English was effective, 24% were neutral, and 11% thought that their communication was ineffective. No significant differences were identified between the results for NI and the RoI, or indeed with the extent to which SMEs are of the opinion that they need an LMS or the extent to which they already engage with foreign languages.

The reasons given by those who report their communication to be effective are fourfold with the following a selection of representative responses in each of the four categories:

(1) SMEs feel that they achieve their objectives with only minor misunderstandings:

"Years of experience explaining complex technical problems but could always improve." (NI)  
We are rarely understood or misunderstand to a degree that loses us or harms business.  
(NI)

"It's not as straightforward as dealing with domestic suppliers however not prohibitive." (NI)  
"Works well but need to be careful to avoid miscommunications." (NI)

"Germany, Belgium, Netherlands, China, Strong English, however, you need to be very clear." (RoI)

(2) SMEs' customers and suppliers speak good English:

"Any supplier we use can communicate in English." (NI)

"All of our customers have some level of English." (NI)

(3) English is the expected language of the sector:

"Primary business language is expected to be English." (NI)

“English normally first language in engineering.” (RoI)

#### (4) Linguists on staff

“We have many dual linguists who understand not just the language in question but the culture of dealing with other non-English speaking countries.” (NI)

“All communication channelled through one person. Would be more effective if more spoke French.” (RoI)

The qualitative responses also indicate that, even among the cohort responding that their communication is effective, there is recognition of a remaining need for care as well as scope for improvement.

Those who gave a neutral, ‘don’t know’, response included two who did not engage outside of English-speaking countries, three who dealt with customers and suppliers who speak some English and three who operated through foreign languages, to some extent although some miscommunication occurred .

Finally, two SMEs responded that their communication with non-English speakers was ineffective citing limited or a lack of foreign language capacity as the reason.

#### *Missed opportunities owing to ineffective communication with non-native English speakers*

Half of the SMEs did not believe that they had missed an opportunity owing to a failure to communicate with customers and suppliers who speak a first language other than English. 21% were neutral on this issue while another 21% felt that they had missed opportunities, with no statistically significant differences observed between NI and the RoI. In addition, no differences emerged on this variable between either those SMEs who engage with foreign languages and those who do not, or between those who feel they need an LMS or already have an LMS and those who do not.

The 50% of SMEs who noted that they had not missed an opportunity gave a variety of reasons for this view, ranging from a focus on the domestic market to their effective use of agents abroad. Others commented that they were not aware of having missed opportunities. One commented that they were doing well with suppliers and relatively so with customers noting ‘We generally are able to communicate with suppliers and 70% of customers.’ (RoI) while two felt that they were achieving their goals but with issues around understanding remaining.

Those who took a neutral position included one who was unaware of having missed an opportunity, three who have not yet sought to engage outside of English-speaking markets and three who had lost out on opportunities, were continuing to do so and were aware that this could happen in the future.

Finally, the SMEs who stated that they had missed opportunities focussed on a loss of potential business and challenges arising out of miscommunication with existing customers and suppliers. They commented:

“We have historically been asked for language skills and this could have led to incremental business.” (NI)

“With the lack of proper communication/evaluation, the wrong message was conveyed which led to miscommunication. This lost us business.” (RoI)

#### *Language factors influencing choice of export markets or suppliers*

The participating SMEs were relatively evenly split in their views on whether or not the foreign language factor had influenced their choice of export market(s) with 39% stating that it had not, 42% that it had and 13% neutral. There was no significant difference between the RoI and NI responses or between the responses by those who already engage with foreign languages or express the need for an LMS and those who do not.

A closer analysis of the responses by the SMEs who reported that language does not influence choice of export markets or suppliers indicate that this response covers a wide range of contexts. It includes both those SMEs who have chosen not to engage beyond English-speaking countries and those who have found a way to operate, where necessary, in other languages that works at least relatively well for them. This latter cohort comments for example:

“Made the best of it. Sourced the supplier then worked out how best to communicate.” (NI)

“We don’t let it hold us back. It would restrict our sourcing.” (NI)

Those giving a neutral response commented that language has not yet been an influencing factor (NI), that they are in the ‘early stages of dealing with overseas customers’ and that the ‘foreign workforce tend to speak English’. (NI). One NI SME observed language to be an influencing factor in relation to export markets but not in relation to supplier choice.

The cohort describing language as an influential factor is made up primarily of SMEs who have elected not to engage with customers and/or suppliers in regions where English is not a first language. In their qualitative responses, they stress the importance to them of ease and, in one case, cost of communication:

“We have targeted English speaking/western influenced markets. We have turned down

opportunities due to translation costs.”

One NI SME also refers to the influence of their staff’s existing language profiles, commenting that they ‘have a tendency to try and explore markets where [we] have a native speaker on [our] staff.

Finally, 16, or 42%, of the SMEs surveyed indicated the types of supports that might assist them in developing an LMS. Of these, five focussed on the need for translation support and translation tools with the possibility of ‘technical partnerships’ mooted. Two (one NI and one RoI) stressed the importance of local interpreters who could be called upon where needed. Six felt that broader supports combining language and translation support with cultural awareness training and context-specific information would benefit them.

One NI SME, referring to the practice of employing university students of language and business as part of internship programmes, favoured ‘student placements in market in a teaching capacity’. A second argued for ‘help in identifying good distributors in other target markets so we have locals selling our products in their markets. (RoI)’. Finally, within their own companies, one NI SME felt that they would benefit from hiring more native speakers and one RoI SME favoured the route of an in-house expert or alternatively an external consultant who would take responsibility for translation and localisation.

## **Discussion**

The primary purpose of this study was to shed light on the issue of LMSs in SMEs on the island of Ireland (in NI and the RoI) particularly in the context of a current lack of data in this area.

The first objective of the study was to determine the extent to which RoI and NI SMEs have an LMS in place. The second objective was to assess the attitudes of SMEs in the RoI and NI towards the value of developing an LMS as well as the kinds of supports that would be useful to them in doing so. The results indicate that this is a complex area characterised by differences in SME needs, profiles and attitudes.

Based on self-reports, contextualised by the definition of an LMS as ‘the planned adoption of a range of techniques to facilitate communication with customers and suppliers abroad’, 16% of the participating SMEs had a formal LMS in place while 71% did not. While below the EU average, this finding represents an increase on the figures reported by the ELAN study (European Commission 2006) for both the RoI and NI. Furthermore, the participating SMEs’ descriptions of how they communicated with customers and suppliers whose first language is not English indicates that, while they may not have reported having an LMS, 45% of the SMEs, who participated in this study, engaged in at least one communicative strategy which facilitated engagement with languages other than English.

In spite of both NI and the RoI being below the EU average, there is nonetheless a striking

contrast between the results for the NI and the ROI SMEs. 33% of ROI SMEs reported having an LMS compared with 4% of NI SMEs. In addition, engagement with languages other than English, outside of a formal LMS, was significantly more prevalent among ROI SMEs than NI SMEs. No obvious reasons emerged from the qualitative data in relation to why this difference might exist. Reflecting on the contextual differences between the two locations (Study: Background and Context), it may be that a combination of factors including the ROI's established position as a small open economy largely dependent on international trade (European Commission 2021), ROI fears of increased difficulties associated with future trade relations with the UK arising from 'Brexit' and the resultant need to consider suppliers and markets further afield, a relatively more multilingual population in the ROI when compared with NI, a more porous society in the ROI characterised by a long history of emigration and a more recent one of immigration, and an exposure of the vast majority of children in the ROI to both Irish and English from a young age within the education system, may all have played a role. Such interpretation of the findings is however based on speculation and requires further study for confirmation.

It is clear from the data gathered for this study that the participating SMEs who did not engage with languages other than English were not a homogenous group in terms of their approaches to communication with customers and suppliers whose first language is not English. Instead, they can be viewed as three distinct sub-groups as follows: The first sub-group, made up of 13% of the participating SMEs (7% of the ROI SMEs and 17% of NI SMEs), did not engage beyond the English-speaking world, the second sub-group, consisting of 26% of the participants (20% of the ROI SMEs and 30% of NI SMEs), engaged with countries where the first language is not English but made no accommodation for this fact, and the third sub-group, 16% of the participants (13% of the ROI SMEs and 26% of NI SMEs), employed communicative strategies, which did not involve the use of a foreign language, to increase the effectiveness of communication across languages.

It is possible that the first of the above three sub-groups may have perceived linguistic difference as an insurmountable barrier (Harzing, Köster and Magner 2011) (See also comment by IBEC, Study: Background and Context). The second sub-group appeared content to operate from a position of language-based power (Takino 2020) assuming that communication through English would be possible. This view that 'English is enough' (Introduction) is not unusual in many (predominantly) Anglophone countries (Lanvers 2011). The third sub-group communicated across languages using some of the solutions to a language barrier, which stop short of engaging with a language other than their native language. These included a number of the approaches identified by Harzing Köster and Magner (2011) such as building in redundancy in the communication exchange, using frequent repetition, and adjustments in the mode of communication, for example, prioritising concise emails and/or summarising a phone conversation in a subsequent written communication.

The SMEs in this study who engaged with foreign languages in order to communicate across languages used the following strategies most frequently: Employed local agents, used translators and/or translation tools, drew on the language skills of existing staff, employed

interpreters, and recruited staff with language skills, the latter three mirroring the results of the ELAN Study (European Commission 2006).

The extent to which the adoption of these communicative strategies represents a planned or strategic approach to the management of communication across languages is unclear. Responses such as 'Made the best of it. Sourced the supplier then worked out how best to communicate' (NI), 'No set strategy in place, will find a solution if it is a problem' and 'We don't let it hold us back....advice would be welcome' (NI) suggest more reactive than proactive approaches to language planning within some of the SMEs surveyed. This reactive attitude to language planning may also partly explain the response by SMEs that they do not have an LMS while simultaneously engaging with the communicative strategies, tools and techniques commonly associated in the literature (LMSs in SMEs above) with an LMS.

The second objective of this study was to explore the attitudes of SMEs in the RoI and NI towards an LMS. The following elements were considered: (1) their need for an LMS, (2) the effectiveness of communication currently, (3) missed opportunities, and (4) whether language was a factor in choice of export markets and/or suppliers.

Analysis of the data reveals that the majority of the RoI SMEs were of the opinion that they needed an LMS while the majority of the NI SMEs expressed the view that they did not. The reasons explored above as to why relatively more RoI than NI SMEs had an LMS or engaged with foreign languages are likely to be relevant here, given the likely link between attitudes and practice.

Secondly, the majority of the SMEs to whom this question was relevant reported that their communication with customers and suppliers whose first language was not English was effective. Their responses indicated that these SMEs included those who were happy to operate from a position of unequal power relations, at least in relation to the linguistic aspect of their relationship (Fairclough 2001: 3, 48), those who communicated across languages using solutions which did not require engagement with a foreign language, and those who used solutions which required engagement with a foreign language. Their assertion that their communication was effective was based on the fact that they managed to achieve their goals. However, despite the majority of SMEs describing their communication as effective, they nonetheless stressed the need for careful communication and reported on their experience of minor misunderstandings including potentially the types of cross-cultural miscommunications that Fairclough (2001: 48) suggests are likely to arise because of differences in discursal conventions, as well as the difficulties associated with the translation of technical terminology.

Approximately one fifth of the SMEs reported missing out on a business opportunity for reasons directly related to foreign languages. Japan and Saudi Arabia were mentioned as examples of locations where this had been an issue. In addition, a significant number of additional SMEs commented that they may have missed out on opportunities because of the language factor but could not confirm whether or not this was the case. This finding again echoes the comment by IBEC (Study: Background and Context).

The SMEs were relatively evenly split on whether or not language was a factor in the choice of export markets and/or suppliers. SMEs describing language as an influential factor include the sub-group already discussed above who perceived the language barrier as insurmountable and had, therefore, elected not to engage beyond English-speaking markets and suppliers. However, SMEs who described language as an influential factor also included those who engaged beyond English-speaking contexts because they already had a native speaker of the relevant language on their staff. Thus, those SMEs who described language as a factor in their choice of export markets and/or suppliers include both those who perceived language to be a barrier, and those who viewed pre-existing language capacity within their company as an added resource or source of opportunity. Thus, as pointed out by Takino (2020: 519) the language factor can act as both a barrier and a facilitator in different contexts.

The SMEs felt that there was a need for a number of supports for those interested in developing an LMS. There included technical translation support in the form of translation tools and financial support for outsourcing, the facilitated sharing of resources, the provision of interpreters in different markets, and training in the languages and cultures of specific markets, with the Nordic and Asian markets given particular mention. SMEs also referred, in relation to this question, to the in-house supports they would value. These included native speakers on their staff as well as specialists in translation and localisation.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This study provides initial baseline information on LMSs in SMEs in NI and the RoI. The results indicate that approximately two thirds of the RoI SMEs who participated in this study engaged with foreign languages in some capacity while just under one third of NI SMEs did so. This is a higher figure than that suggested by large-scale European studies. However, the participant SMEs in this study were taking part in seminars on growth and internationalisation and therefore likely to be giving serious consideration to their communication with customers and suppliers abroad. Furthermore, in many cases, the nature of the SMEs engagement with foreign languages was not yet sufficiently strategically developed to be termed an LMS.

The participant SMEs can be categorised as those who viewed communication with speakers of a language other than English as an insurmountable barrier, those who assumed that communication through English would function automatically in all contexts, those who engaged in accommodation of and empathic communication with non-native speakers of English, albeit through English, and those who engaged with languages other than English in a range of different ways. An optimum LMS is dependent on an SME's particular context and goals. The development of such an LMS is deserving of careful consideration alongside the other core elements of an SME's strategic planning.

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup><http://www.britishchambers.org.uk/press-office>

<sup>ii</sup>The SMEs were classified according to the NACE (Nomenclature statistique des activités économiques dans la Communauté européenne) Classification System (levels 1&2 with information on level 2 classifications available in Table 4), the standard classification system for economic activities in the European Union, Eurostat: [Europa - RAMON - Classification Detail List](#)

<sup>iii</sup>The research was granted full research ethics clearance by the University Research Ethics Committee.

<sup>iv</sup>An LMS was defined both for the purpose of this research (see section entitled 'Language Management Strategies' above) and in the questionnaire completed by the participants as 'the planned adoption of a range of techniques to facilitate effective communication with clients and suppliers abroad whose first language is not English'.

<sup>v</sup>Both of the RoI SMEs who used these strategies also engaged with foreign languages. Therefore, they were included in both sub-categories. However, they were not included in the total number of SMEs who did not have an LMS.

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## Appendix A

# Communicating with Overseas Clients &

# Suppliers whose First Language is not English

1. How does your company communicate with clients and suppliers abroad in cases where English is not their first language?

2. STATEMENT: Your Communication with overseas clients-suppliers whose first language is not English is Effective.



Please Explain Your Answer/Score:

3. STATEMENT: We have missed an opportunity owing to a failure to communicate appropriately with clients and suppliers abroad



Please Explain Your Answer/Score:

4. STATEMENT: Language factors have influenced our company's choice of export markets or suppliers.

HOW TRUE IS THIS STATEMENT OF YOUR FIRM POSITION ? *Place an X*



Please Explain Your Answer/Score:

*A Language Management Strategy* is the planned adoption of a range of techniques to facilitate effective communication with clients and suppliers abroad whose first language is not English.

5. Would you say that your company has a *Language Management Strategy* in place or that it needs a Language Management Strategy?

Please Explain

6. What kind of supports would be useful to you in developing a *Language Management Strategy* for your company?