

# Foreign language competence in companies – a survey

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## **Abstract**

The project Communicating in Multilingual Contexts meets the Enterprises will provide a virtual learning environment offering language learning materials in six different languages thus opening up opportunities for better trained, and thus more competitive, future and in-service employees. A needs analysis survey of foreign language competences in companies was carried out in order to identify the key language competences commonly required by different sectors of the labour market and design relevant language materials. This paper presents data collected in the Castelo Branco region of Portugal.

**Key words:** needs analysis, survey, foreign language competences, foreign language materials

## **Introduction**

In this paper we will consider responses to a needs analysis survey of foreign language competences in companies in the Castelo Branco region of Portugal in order to identify the key language competences commonly required by different sectors of the labour market and design relevant language materials.

Our paper is divided into six parts. First, we will refer briefly to the present language skills context in the European Union. Second, we will describe the project Communicating in Multilingual Contexts meets the Enterprises: awareness and development of academic and professional language skills for mobility students (henceforth CMC\_E) background, the project itself, its partners, its aims and methodology. Next, we will briefly describe the Castelo Branco region of Portugal and how the survey was carried out. Finally, we will analyse the data which were collected and we will make a few suggestions on how the needs referred to by Portuguese companies may be addressed.

## **Language skills in the European Union**

Today there are about 450 million people of different ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds in the European Union (Eurobarometer 243 Special, 2006, p. 1). Linguistic diversity is, as we all know, a European reality and multilingualism an essential element within the European context and has been on the EU political agenda since January 2007 as a separate portfolio (European Commission, Press Release, 2007; Commission of the European Communities 2007). Therefore, language skills are an asset for any European citizen and, in particular, they facilitate university study, student mobility, university leavers entering the labour market or professionals, allowing better intercultural communication and integration in the host country. Finally, it is also a tool which may be helpful in meeting the new economic challenges of the European Union since, as referred to in a recent study on the effects of the European economy small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are losing contracts as a result of a lack of language skills (ELAN, 2006). A recently published

survey of Europeans and their languages (Eurobarometer 243 Special, 2006) confirms this need as it mentions that 44% of the respondents in the European countries surveyed admit that they do not know any language other than their mother tongue while in Portugal the percentage is even higher – reaching 50%. Therefore, education and professional systems in each country need to play an important role in the promotion of multilingualism.

## **CMC\_E project**

The CMC\_E project is a two-year European project within Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP), Key Activity 2 (languages). The present project is a follow-up of a previous project CMC – Communicating in Multilingual Contexts: awareness and development of academic language skills within the Socrates program – Action Lingua 2 which was carried out between 2004 and 2007. Its aim was to offer university students the opportunity to develop language skills within the Common European framework of reference for languages (Conselho da Europa, 2001), bearing in mind their needs in trans-national higher education contexts ([www.cmcproject.it](http://www.cmcproject.it)).

CMC\_E is a partnership made up of six university institutions: University of Calabria, Italy (coordinating institution); Technical University of Košice, Slovakia; University of Santiago de Compostela, Spain; The London School of Economics and Political Science, United Kingdom; Warsaw Academy of Computer Science, Management and Administration, Poland; Polytechnic Institute of Castelo Branco, Portugal. These six university partners work together with ‘a best practice partner’ enterprise located in Italy (GIAS Gruppo Industriale Alimentari Surgelati).

Drawing from the linguistic and cultural contexts mentioned above, the main objective of CMC\_E is to address the problem of lack of training materials, both from an academic and professional perspective.

It aims to create a virtual learning environment (VLE), offering language materials in six different languages English, Italian, Slovak, Spanish, Polish and Portuguese four of which are less used and less taught languages (i.e. Italian, Slovak, Polish and Portuguese). That is to say, CMC\_E also aims to promote linguistic diversity.

The development of a virtual learning environment may enable users to construct a modular and flexible learning pathway based on their mobility needs and will be based on Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). This approach, which will be adopted in the different languages of the project, has the objective of reinforcing the academic language skills needed in trans-national university contexts. It will also help to develop materials which will attempt to address the current need for professional language skills in the labour market, on the basis of data collected in a survey.

In sum, the first stage of the project included: designing a questionnaire on the professional language needs in the region in which the partners are located; selecting the appropriate companies in each region; carrying out a survey in different sectors of the labour market; and analysing the data.

The second stage includes: creating the didactic guidelines; developing materials; implementing blended learning with face-to-face meetings between an on-campus tutor and learners; and guaranteeing an e-mentor who provides off-line support for the forum guests.

In the present paper we will only refer to the first stage of the project, that is, we will analyse the survey results but only those from Portugal.

## **The Castelo Branco region**

The Castelo Branco region lies in the centre of Portugal. It has an area of 6,675 km<sup>2</sup> which is the 4<sup>th</sup> biggest region of mainland Portugal and it is on the border with Spain. According to the last population census in 2001 it has a population of 208,069 inhabitants while the town of Castelo Branco has about 35,000 (34,524) inhabitants. Most of this population is urban as in the last few decades in Portugal there has been an exodus of many sectors of the rural population to towns. Therefore, the labour market is mainly in urban areas where most companies are based, including industrial firms, services and more specialised businesses. Most companies in the Castelo Branco region are small or medium sized ones. These are normally individual businesses mainly in commerce/sales, construction/building, hospitality and catering industry sectors.

## **The survey**

The survey was the joint work of the project partners and the same in every language. The questionnaire aimed to find out what foreign language competence there is in companies and also what foreign language competence is required, in other words, topics, communicative skills and types of activity.

The questionnaire (see Appendix) was divided into two parts. On the one hand, the survey collected data referring to the contextualisation of the companies in the labour market and, on the other, on the foreign language competence needed in companies. The former refers to the company:

- profile (i.e. production, commerce, sale, services);
- sector of activity;
- main products and/or services;
- number of employees;
- market / general scope (i.e. local, national, international);
- part(s) of the world with which they have business relations.

The latter refers to foreign language competence needs:

- language(s) used to carry out business;
- staff needing to acquire and/or improve competence in any foreign languages;
- business sectors which need to use foreign language(s);
- average level of foreign language competence of staff;
- importance attached to knowing foreign language(s) for different activities carried out (i.e. attracting foreign customers, entering new foreign markets, etc.);
- loss of a business opportunity due to the lack of foreign language skills and lack of knowledge of the foreign culture;
- areas in which problems were experienced (i.e. telephone conversations, translating information; writing letters / faxes / emails etc.);
- language strategies used to deal with foreign clients / suppliers;

- linguistic competence needed in order to better deal with foreign markets; and
- language training provided.

We contacted two business associations and the central services of the Polytechnic Institute where we work in order to obtain contacts with small and medium-sized companies in the Castelo Branco region with which we created our database. Initially we had contacts with 523 companies. However, in the final version of the database the number decreased to 488 as some companies were no longer in business while others had outdated contacts and we were unable to update them.

First, an email or letter (for those who had no email contact) was sent to every enterprise in July 2008 before the questionnaire became available online on the 28th July. The companies were also given an email address and phone number to contact us in case they had any queries. Second, every company was contacted between the 4th-8th of August for the first time, followed by a second telephone call a few days later (on the 11th and 12th of August) for those who had not answered the first call. Finally, there was a third telephone contact on the 16th and 17th of September for those that had not answered the phone in August or those who had promised to fill in the questionnaire in August but had not done so.

## **Data analysis**

Despite our efforts to obtain answers to the questionnaire there were only 41 answers in Portuguese of which six had to be discarded as they were from companies that had already filled in a questionnaire. Thus, of the 488 companies contacted, 35 replied to the questionnaire, that is 7.1%. 54% of these companies are small companies with fewer than 10 employees.

The results on the business profile show that most companies (20) work in services, 12 exclusively in services, and 16 in commerce / sales. Ten of the respondents include themselves in production. However, many of them work in two different areas such as services and commerce or production and commerce.

As for the sectors in which they operate the results are not very conclusive as they spread over a variety of sectors: seven in industry, three in tourism and then two in the building, food, clothing, electrical and ICT sectors. This may be due to the fact that few companies answered the questionnaire.

In the next question respondents were asked about the general scope of their business. 17 have only local or local / national business while only 11 state they have international business relations. Of those who have business relations abroad (question no. 1) 57% deal with European countries followed by 18% with South America and 17% with Africa. In question no. 2 respondents were asked about the language(s) in which they conduct business. About 33% (33.3%) carry it out in Portuguese while about 67% (66.7%) use other languages. If we exclude Portuguese, our expectations were confirmed as to the languages selected: English (40%), Spanish (37%) and French (21%).

These results may suggest that companies tend to use English as this is the lingua franca and therefore most commonly used in international business, followed by Spanish which is the language of our neighbour country, with whom Portugal has most business. There have always been strong links with France where about 1 million Portuguese live. Moreover, most of those who are in the labour market at present learnt French as their first language and English as their second language at

school, while Spanish has only been introduced in school curricula more recently, about ten years ago.

The replies to question no. 3 confirmed that there is a strong need for company staff to learn foreign languages mainly English (23), Spanish (16) and French (13).

Answers to question no. 4 (see Fig. 1) show that there are three sectors in which companies need to use foreign languages the most: Sales (26), Managerial (23), Marketing (14). These topics will be covered in the project materials in units 3 (Finance and Business) and 4 (Marketing). Since the respondents acknowledge a great need for learning foreign languages, it is not surprising that the levels of foreign language competence in the companies are not very high (question no. 5). Most answers are in B1 with: 12 answers for Spanish, 11 for English and 8 for French. There are a few C2 (in French, German and Spanish) which may suggest that they may be former immigrants in France, Germany and Spain, countries to which the Portuguese traditionally used to immigrate.

#### **Chyba! Neplatné prepojenie.**

Figure 1 Company sectors which need to use foreign languages

The answers to question no. 6 may suggest that these small companies are not very interested in the different links between the university and business (e.g. implementing international student placement; integration of foreign graduates into local labour markets, research within business, or cooperation between higher education and the companies). They have other pressing needs such as attracting foreign clients, entering new foreign markets, and enhancing staff mobility at the international level, followed by disseminating information.

The reasons for this result may be two-fold: on the one hand the fact that they are small companies does not allow them to host international students or graduates; on the other hand the difficult international economic situation may lead them to give priority to business relations over other issues.

This priority for business relations may be reinforced by the acknowledgement of 29% that they have already lost a business opportunity due to lack of foreign language skills and knowledge of the foreign culture (question no. 7). To be more specific, the six areas in which they experienced more problems were:

- speaking in formal contexts (9);
- translating information (9);
- understanding written professional material (9);
- failing to follow up contacts for obtaining or providing information (9);
- writing professional reports (9)
- preparing and delivering oral presentations (6) and
- chatting (6).

In order to address these problems the respondents use three language strategies: use the target language of the client (18); have company / sales literature or websites in foreign languages (10) and employ native speakers (10) (question no. 8 – see Fig. 2).

Moreover, respondents' company staff would need several linguistic competences in order better to deal with foreign markets. Their priorities are (question no. 9 part 1):

**4. Which sectors of your company need to use foreign languages?**

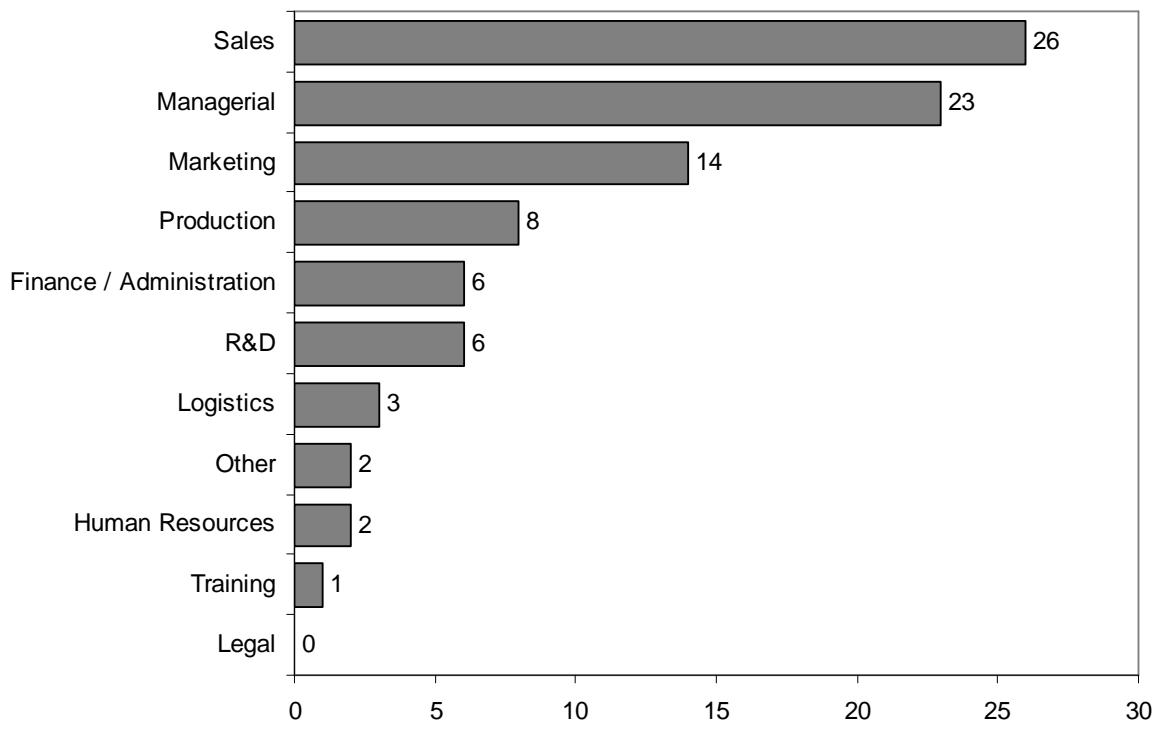


Figure 1 Company sectors which need to use foreign languages

- telephone skills (32);
- listening and speaking skills (29);
- writing skills (e.g. emails, faxes) (28);
- knowledge of specific/technical lexicon (24); and
- presenting products at international exhibitions (19).

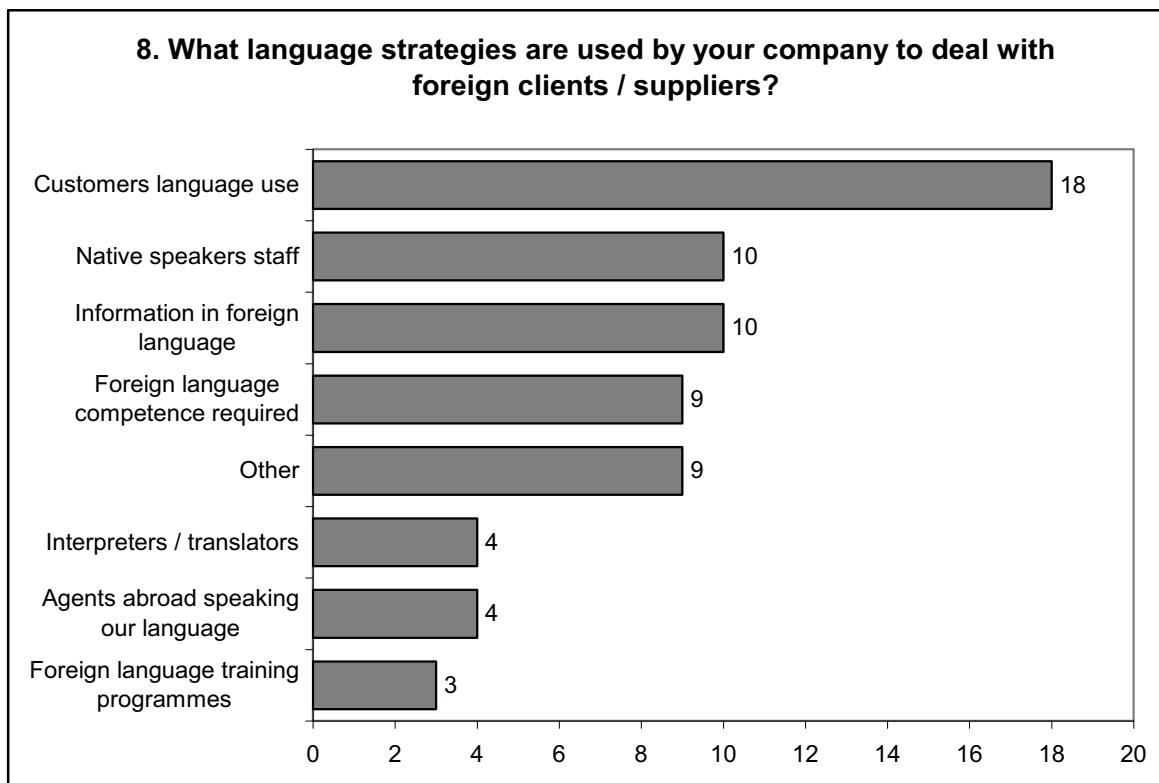


Figure 2 Language strategies used by companies to deal with foreign clients / suppliers

These five skills are all addressed in the materials that we are developing. It is interesting to note that, although in question 7 respondents said they had difficulties with translation they did not consider it very important. They also referred to difficulties in understanding written professional material. However, most of them did not choose reading skills in specialised language as a company need. The five topics that were considered useful were the following: administration, technology, business and finance, marketing, and law (question no. 9 part 2 – see Fig. 3).

The materials that are being developed in this project cover all except one of these topics – law. It should however be remembered that legal systems vary a lot from country to country which would make it difficult to develop parallel materials. Finally, as the answer to question no. 10 since only 10% of the companies provide language training for their employees these materials may prove to be a useful tool in the near future.

**9. Which of the following topics are needed by your company staff in order to better deal with foreign markets?**

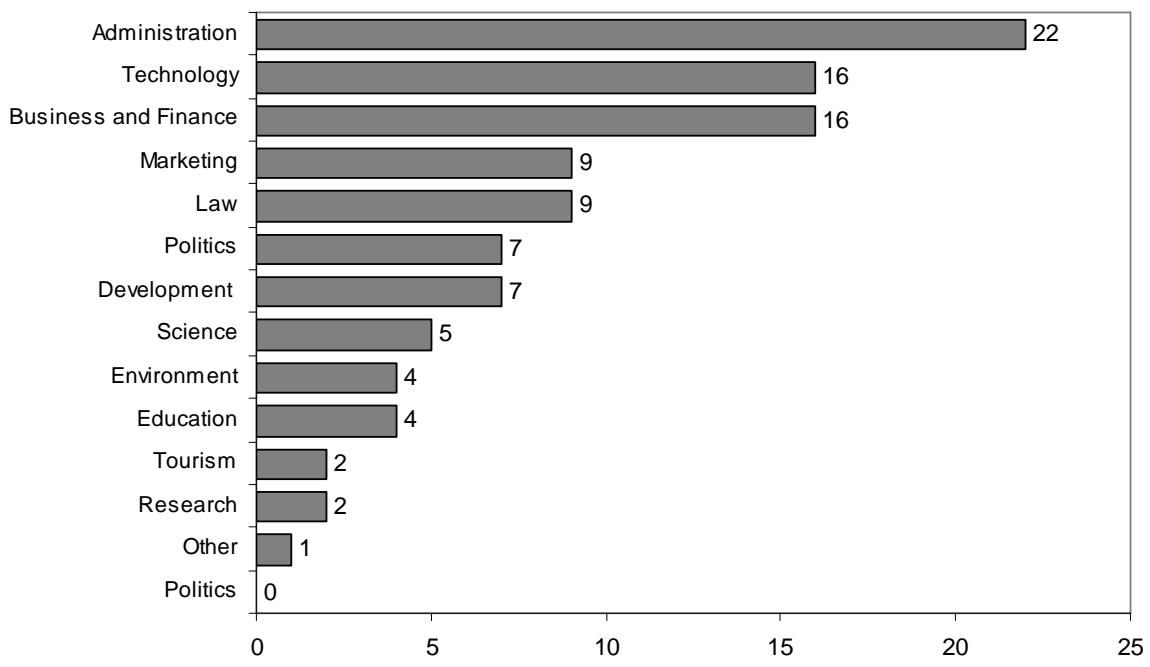


Figure 3 Topics needed by companies to in order to better deal with foreign markets

### Figure 3 Topics needed by companies to better deal with foreign markets

## Conclusion

The results of the questionnaire suggest that there is a need to learn and / or improve foreign language skills in small and medium sized companies in the Castelo Branco region in order better to deal with foreign markets (71%). It also seems to confirm that a shortage of foreign language skills in companies may lead to loss of business (29%).

Second, our expectations were confirmed when respondents stated that the languages they both use most and most need are English, Spanish and French. The project partly addresses this need as it will offer materials in two of these languages. The reason for the need for these three languages may be explained on the one hand by the fact that English is the lingua franca for business and, on the other hand, by our geographical position and our traditional business and cultural relations with both Spain and France. The use of French may also be explained by the fact that this language used to be a compulsory subject at secondary school and many employees / employers might have studied it and, therefore, tend to use it in communication with foreign companies.

Third, most companies are small sized ones which may account for the lack of training offered. Therefore, a learning context in which materials can be used either in blended learning at university or in independent learning together with off-line support may be a good opportunity to improve foreign language competence.

Finally, the guidelines drawn up for the five units of CMC\_E attempt to address most of the needs identified by the respondents as far as: unit topics, communicative skills and types of activity are concerned.

## Note:

1. David Marsh (2002: 58), in a report by the European Commission, mentions that the European Network of Administrators, Researchers, and Practitioners, with the European Commission support adopted “the term Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) as a generic umbrella term which would encompass any activity in which a foreign language is used as a tool in the learning of a non-language subject in which both language and the subject have a joint curricular role.”

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## **Appendix**

**Please insert the Name of your Institution**

### **CMC\_E. Communicating in Multilingual Contexts meets Enterprises**

European Project funded by the European Commission  
Longlife Learning Programme (LLP), Lingua Action 2

#### **NEEDS ANALYSIS SURVEY ON FOREIGN LANGUAGE COMPETENCES IN ENTERPRISES**

**The University meets Enterprises**

**Below you will find 10 questions regarding the importance of competences in foreign languages in Enterprises.**

**Name of enterprise**

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**Location of enterprise:**

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**Name of respondent:**

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**Job title:**

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**e-mail address of respondent:**

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**What is the profile of your company? (you can chose more than one)**

Production  Services  Commerce / Sales  Other

**In which sector does your enterprise operate?**

Banking	<input type="checkbox"/>	Environment	<input type="checkbox"/>	Mining / Metallurgic / Oil	<input type="checkbox"/>
Bio-medical	<input type="checkbox"/>	Fashion	<input type="checkbox"/>	Paper-making	<input type="checkbox"/>
Building	<input type="checkbox"/>	Finance	<input type="checkbox"/>	Pharmaceutical	<input type="checkbox"/>
Chemical	<input type="checkbox"/>	Food	<input type="checkbox"/>	Public Administration	<input type="checkbox"/>
<u>Communication</u> and marketing	<input type="checkbox"/>	Furniture	<input type="checkbox"/>	Publishing	<input type="checkbox"/>
<u>Computing - Internet</u>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Health	<input type="checkbox"/>	Real Estate	<input type="checkbox"/>
Distribution and shipping / Logistics	<input type="checkbox"/>	ICT	<input type="checkbox"/>	Telecommunication	<input type="checkbox"/>
E-commerce	<input type="checkbox"/>	Industrial (various sectors)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Textile / Clothing / Accessories	<input type="checkbox"/>
Education	<input type="checkbox"/>	Installations and Machinery	<input type="checkbox"/>	Tourism	<input type="checkbox"/>
Electric appliances	<input type="checkbox"/>	Mechanical	<input type="checkbox"/>	Transportation services (e.g. bus services)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Electronics	<input type="checkbox"/>	Means of transport (e.g. cars, boats, motorcycles)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other	<input type="checkbox"/>

### What are your main products/ services?

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#### How many employees do you have?

< 10	<input type="checkbox"/>	51-100	<input type="checkbox"/>
11- 20	<input type="checkbox"/>	101-250	<input type="checkbox"/>
21- 50	<input type="checkbox"/>	over 250	<input type="checkbox"/>

#### What is the general scope of your business?

Local	<input type="checkbox"/>
National	<input type="checkbox"/>
International	<input type="checkbox"/>

#### 1. In which part of the world do you currently have business relations?

Africa	<input type="checkbox"/>	East Europe and Russia	<input type="checkbox"/>	New Zealand	<input type="checkbox"/>
Asia	<input type="checkbox"/>	Europe	<input type="checkbox"/>	South America	<input type="checkbox"/>
Australia	<input type="checkbox"/>	Mediterranean area	<input type="checkbox"/>	No areas at the moment but we will in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>

Central America  North America

No areas

If you wish, mention the country

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**2. Which language/s do you use to carry out business?**

Arabic   
Chinese

French   
Italian

Polish   
Portuguese

Slovak   
Spanish

English

German

Russian

Other

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**3. Does your company staff need to acquire and/or improve competence in any foreign languages?**

Yes

No

If so, which? (number them in order of importance for meeting the company's needs, 1=most important)

Arabic   
Chinese

French   
Italian

Polish   
Portuguese

Slovak   
Spanish

English

German

Russian

Other

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**4. Which sectors of your company need to use foreign languages?**

- Managerial
- Research and Development
- Marketing
- Sales
- Production
- Other

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- Logistics
- Finance and Administration
- Legal
- Human Resources
- Training

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**5. How would you rate the average level of foreign language competence of your company staff?**

(select the language/s and tick the appropriate item below)

Language	very high C2*	high C1-B2	fair B1	basic A2	poor A1
Arabic	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Chinese	<input type="checkbox"/>				
French	<input type="checkbox"/>				
German	<input type="checkbox"/>				
English	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Italian	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Polish	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Portuguese	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Russian	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Slovak	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Spanish	<input type="checkbox"/>				

(\* based on the Common European Framework of Reference, Council of Europe 2001)

## 6. How important is knowing foreign languages for:

	crucial	important	not at all
Attracting foreign customers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Entering new foreign markets	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Disseminating information (e.g. internal, to clients, for technical support)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Encouraging research within the Enterprise	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Supporting cooperation between Higher Education and Enterprise	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Accelerating the transfer of knowledge and innovation from University to Enterprise and vice versa	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Implementing international student placements/traineeships in Enterprise	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Facilitating the integration of foreign graduates into local labour markets	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Enhancing staff mobility at the international level	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## 7. Have you ever lost a business opportunity due to the lack of foreign language skills and

**lack of knowledge of the foreign culture?**

Yes

No

**If so, which language?**

## 7.1 In which areas have you experienced problems? (you can choose more than one answer)

Speaking competence in formal contexts

Translating information (e.g. brochures, etc.)

Understanding written professional material	<input type="checkbox"/>
Understanding specific/technical lexicon	<input type="checkbox"/>
Using specific/technical lexicon	<input type="checkbox"/>
Communicating over the telephone	<input type="checkbox"/>
Writing letters/faxes/emails	<input type="checkbox"/>
Failing to follow up contacts for obtaining or providing information	<input type="checkbox"/>
Writing professional reports/contracts	<input type="checkbox"/>
Preparing and delivering oral presentations (e.g. information about company, business plans, selling strategies)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Presenting products at international exhibitions	<input type="checkbox"/>
Chatting in informal contexts (e.g. business dinners, social dinners)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Staff knowledge of the culture of the foreign country	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please specify) _____	

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**8. What language strategies are used by your company to deal with foreign clients / suppliers? (you can choose more than one answer)**

Our company/sales literature or web sites are also in foreign languages	<input type="checkbox"/>
We employ native speakers	<input type="checkbox"/>
Language competence is as a criterion for selecting staff	<input type="checkbox"/>
We offer language training programmes for our staff	<input type="checkbox"/>
We use the target language of the customers	<input type="checkbox"/>
We work with agents in the foreign market who speak our native language	<input type="checkbox"/>
We commission external interpreters/translators for foreign trade	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please, specify) _____	

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**9. Which of the following linguistic competence are needed by your company staff in order to better deal with foreign markets? (choose the 5 most important, 1 = most important)**

Listening and speaking skills	<input type="checkbox"/>
Telephone skills	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reading skills in specialised language	<input type="checkbox"/>
Knowledge of specific/technical lexicon	<input type="checkbox"/>
Translating information (e.g. brochures etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Writing skills (e.g. cover letters, e-mails, faxes, reports)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Delivering oral presentations (e.g. information about company, business plans, selling strategies)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Presenting products at international exhibitions	<input type="checkbox"/>
Communicating in informal contexts	<input type="checkbox"/>
Knowledge of cultural aspects of the other country	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please specify) _____	

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**...and in which particular topics? (you can choose more than one answer)**

Administration	<input type="checkbox"/>
Business and Finance	<input type="checkbox"/>
Development (e.g. sustainable, local, global)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Education	<input type="checkbox"/>

Environment	<input type="checkbox"/>
Law	<input type="checkbox"/>
Marketing	<input type="checkbox"/>
Politics	<input type="checkbox"/>
Research	<input type="checkbox"/>
Society	<input type="checkbox"/>
Science	<input type="checkbox"/>
Technology	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tourism	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please, specify)	<hr/>

**10. Does your company provide language training for its employees?**

Yes  No

**If so, please specify in which language/s.**

Complete the table below to specify the frequency, the length, the number of hours and the course content/skills (e.g. listening and speaking skills, reading and writing skills, translating, grammar).

	Frequency	Length	Total number of hours?	Course content / skills
In-house language courses	_____	_____	_____	_____
Courses at local language institutions	_____	_____	_____	_____
University language courses	_____	_____	_____	_____
Language courses abroad	_____	_____	_____	_____
Other	_____	_____	_____	_____

Please feel free to add any other comments (e.g. what courses are appropriate for your staff, what staff sectors need to develop language competences, etc.):

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***Thank you for your collaboration!***