

Foreign-language skills will be key to the success of many Irish businesses in the coming years as non-English speaking countries take a bigger and bigger slice of the global economy and Ireland becomes more diverse.

But even when they are speaking English, foreign-language speakers can boost a company's performance. Language learners tend to be better listeners, better able to juggle competing priorities and are more sensitive to diversity, studies have shown.

## TOMORROW'S MARKETS

As China closes in on replacing the United States as the world's largest economy and developing countries take over as the drivers of global growth, Irish companies are going to have to get used to a world less dominated by the English language.

Much of our future export growth is expected to come from faster-growing non-English speaking countries, like China, Brazil, Russia and Latin America, where the level of language skills is often lower than in traditional EU markets.

Better language skills could help Irish exporters to avoid "unquantifiable missed opportunities," Ireland's largest business group IBEC has said. And services exports, which require significantly more language skills than goods exports, are growing as a proportion of Irish exports.

[<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Curriculum-and-Syllabus/Foreign-Languages-Strategy/Enterprise/Foreign-Languages-Tony-Donohoe-IBEC.pdf>]

The good news is that hundreds of thousands of migrants who have made Ireland home in recent decades have brought rich language skills.

Over 500,000 people in Ireland speak a language other than English at home, according to the latest census. Over 30,000 people in Ireland speak Spanish at home and over 20,000 speak Portuguese, according to census data. Over 17,000 speak Chinese while 16,000 speak Arabic.

## BREXIT

After Britain leaves the European Union, our non-English speaking EU neighbours will also become even more important to Ireland, raising the demand for foreign-language skills.

An Irish government report on future skills requirements in the wake of Brexit said that Ireland would need to build up a multi-lingual work force for trade in an increasingly globalised marketplace. We will also need to build up a cadre of international sales professional as a d enhance international customer service skills, it said.

## GOOD FOR YOUR BRAIN

While foreign-language speakers bring essential hard skills to their employer, they can also boast of less obvious soft skills.

Language learning is good for your brain. Speaking more than one language can help make you a better listener, improve your creativity and help you to better manage multiple tasks, studies have shown.

<https://news.psu.edu/story/160653/2011/02/18/juggling-languages-can-build-better-brains>

<https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/bilinguals-switch-tasks-faster-monolinguals-nih-funded-study-shows>

<http://www.pnas.org/content/early/2012/04/23/1201575109>

<https://news.northwestern.edu/stories/2012/04/kraus-bilingualism-music>

A diversity of languages and cultures in a workplace brings a diversity of ways of looking at the world. Such diversity can reduce group-think and improve creativity in solving complex problems.

By providing learners with a window on other cultures, languages make people more open-minded. A diverse staff will be sensitive to the kind cultural mistakes that can be so damaging in today's hyper-connected world.

#### DEEP UNDERSTANDING

While external translators and interpreters can help solve some language problems, in the long term they can be expensive and cannot provide the deep and wide understanding of a language and culture required to truly succeed in a new market.

Recent EU research indicates companies can achieve higher export sales growth by implementing a foreign language development strategy to boost linguistic and cultural awareness throughout a firm. That strategy might include some native-English speaking professionals with strong language skills, some native speakers and a programme to boost understanding at every level of the firm.

[http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/languages/policy/strategic-framework/documents/pimlico-full-report\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/languages/policy/strategic-framework/documents/pimlico-full-report_en.pdf)

Employing someone with language and cultural knowledge of a potential market can start a conversation of an expansion that might not have otherwise been contemplated.

Even a little knowledge of a client's language - and a little knowledge of their culture - can be the difference between success and failure in an increasingly diverse world.

Significant investment is required if Irish businesses are to be competitive in the coming years. Ireland was ranked 44th for language skills that meet the needs of enterprise, in 2017 by the Institute for Management Development in 2017.

[https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Curriculum-and-Syllabus/Foreign-Languages-Strategy/fls\\_languages\\_connect\\_strategy.pdf](https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Curriculum-and-Syllabus/Foreign-Languages-Strategy/fls_languages_connect_strategy.pdf)

