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Linguistic conditions in Danish industries

Language, both Danish and foreign, is a subject that concerns the Confederation of Danish Industry (DI) very much. In co-operation with Copenhagen Business School and Lisbeth Verstraete, we conducted a survey last year of the corporate sector's demand for skills in foreign languages – which linguistic and communicational challenges do enterprises in international business have and what consequences do these challenges pose for the enterprises.

I would like to begin with a short summary of the survey and its results. Afterwards, I will explain how DI sees the demand for language, and which initiatives we believe will strengthen foreign language skills in Denmark.

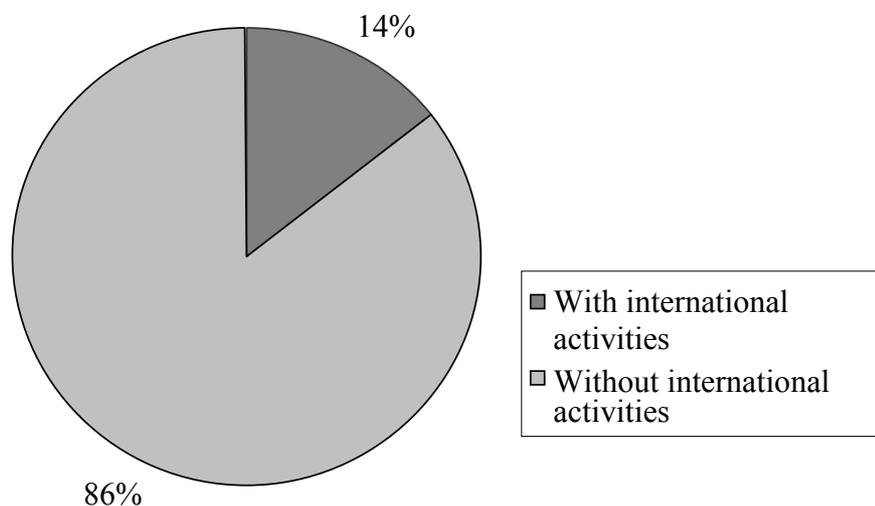
The fact that Denmark is a small economy which is dependent on the surrounding world was the starting point for our survey. Inter-state trade is crucial for our country's continuing growth and prosperity – and that requires ability both to penetrate the global market and to communicate with old and new trading partners.

This calls for enterprises and employees to possess inter-cultural understanding and great communication skills, which are decisive elements when enterprises compete in an increasingly globalised market.

There are many unwritten rules that enterprises must know and gain insight into: How does one behave at meetings? How does one address business associates? And how does one discuss and obtain good results?

In short: In order to trade at an international level, it is important to be able to make meaningful conversation. And the key to understanding a foreign culture is to understand and speak the language.

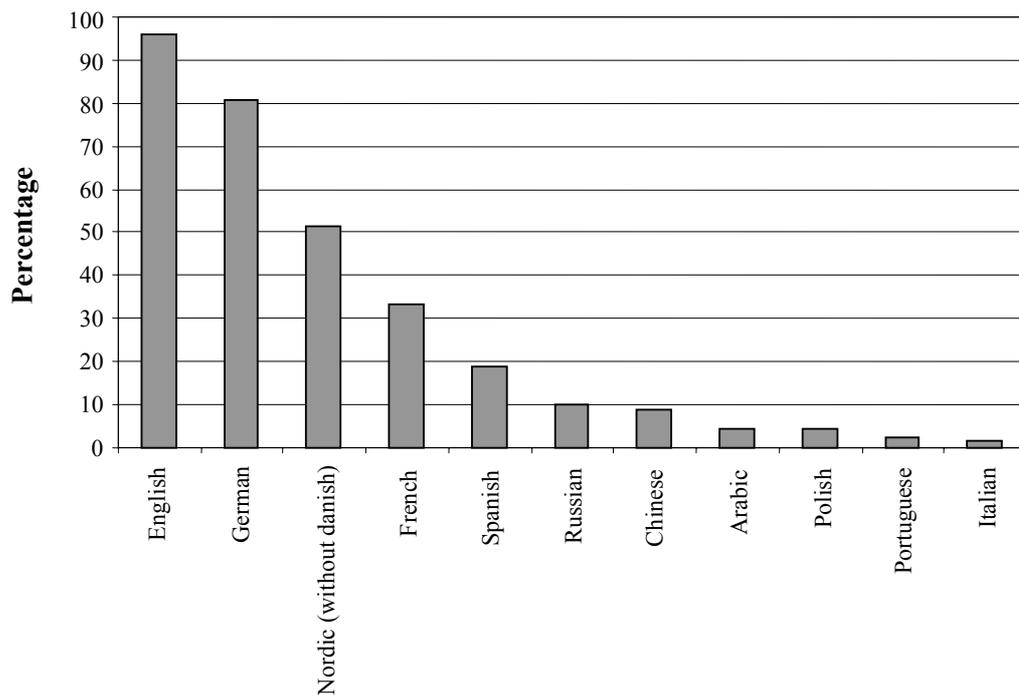
Share of enterprises with international activities



The international market constitutes the major part of the enterprise's business, for almost nine out of ten of the participants in our survey. 86 percent of the enterprises have international activities, such as trade, international collaboration, and subsidiary companies.

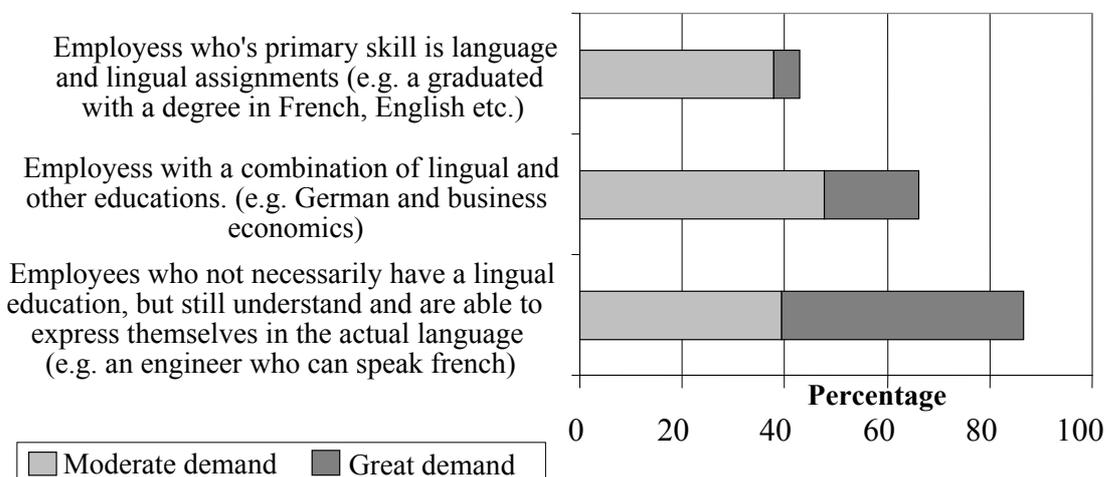
The trade of Danish enterprises takes place all over the world, but especially in Scandinavian, German, and English speaking areas.

Foreign language skills represented in the enterprises



The international activities put forward a demand on enterprises and their employees, when it comes to communication and collaboration with different groups of languages. Basically all the participating enterprises have dual or multi-lingual employees.

Which types of employees with foreign language skills are in demand?

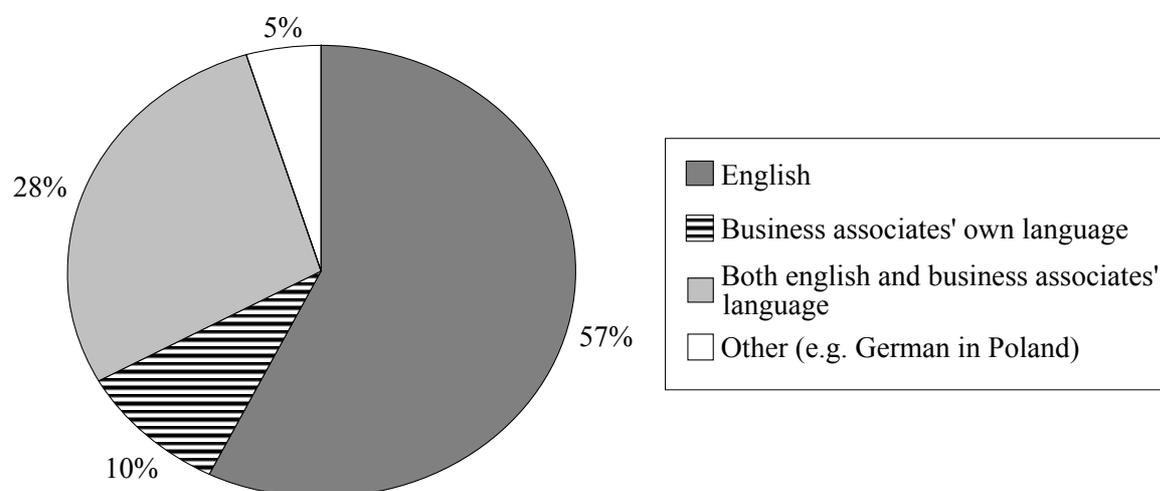


The enterprises are aware of the significance of foreign language skills. But it is not employees with a pure linguistic education that are the most sought after. Only three percent of the enterprises interviewed believe that they need employees with a pure linguistic education. It is, first of all, due to the fact that there are not enough assignments/tasks for employees with such an education. Instead, enterprises choose external consultants when the help of language experts is required. Therefore, one may say, there is a more indirect demand.

Concerning foreign language skills, the enterprises indicate that they need employees with double skills – in other words, an employee that is able to take part in the daily business operation or production, but at the same time has a high level of foreign language skills. For example, an engineer who is fluent in German or a graduate who speaks French.

These employees will be able to manage the daily contact with foreign partners, along with having meetings in foreign languages and understanding a foreign culture. But since these employees are not as such linguistic educated, they will not have the thorough knowledge and insight into a language and all its aspects. Therefore, there will still be a demand for experts.

The primary language of communication which the enterprise uses in relation to the enterprise's largest business associates



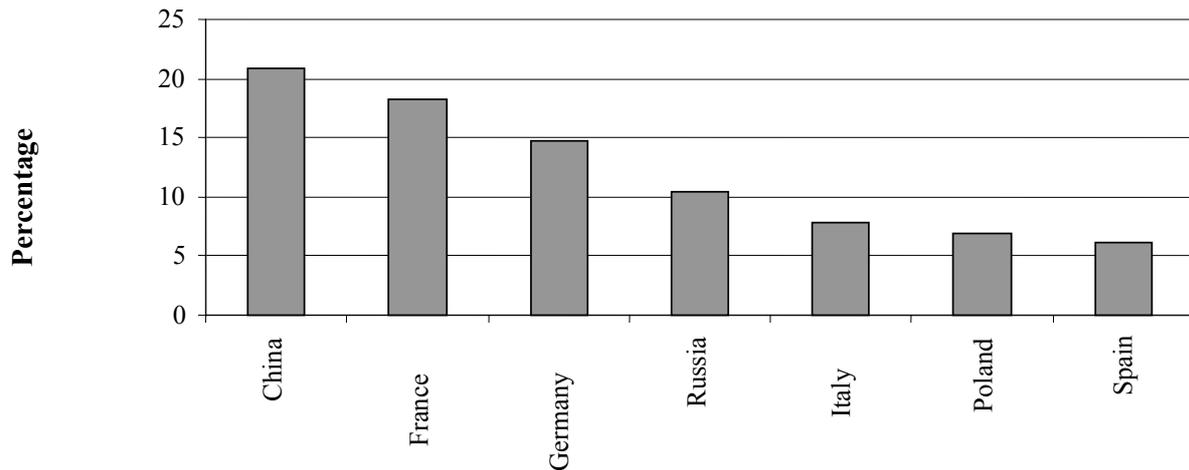
If we look closer at the languages in the different enterprises, we find that English is the dominant foreign language.

English is the language that basically all enterprises use when they communicate and trade at the international market. 96 percent of the enterprises have one or more employees who are able to communicate in English.

And English is the primary business language. More than half of the enterprises use English when they communicate with business associates, and about one third use both English and their business associates' local language. The enterprises' business associates are mostly able to communicate and negotiate in English, and that is the reason why most enterprises choose to communicate in English.

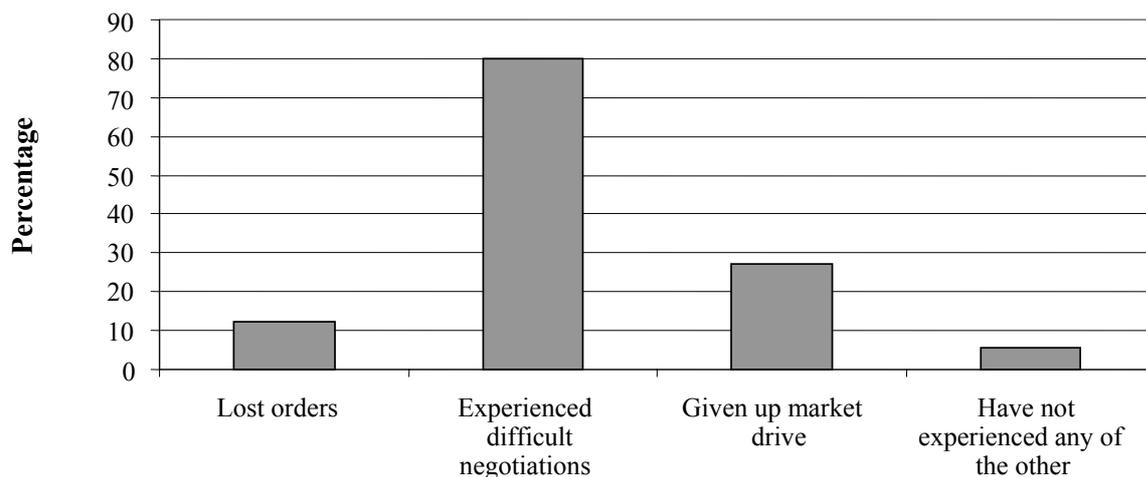
But not all speak English equally well. Enterprises therefore also meet communication challenges. About four out of ten of the participating enterprises have experienced communication issues with enterprises in other countries because of lack of foreign language skills.

Countries where enterprises have faced communication difficulties



Especially Chinese enterprises are difficult to communicate with. But enterprises also experience communication difficulties in some of Denmark's biggest export markets, such as France and Germany.

Problems the enterprises have experienced, due to lack of foreign language skills



The consequences of communication difficulties vary: It is everything, from minor misunderstandings, to an enterprise losing a contract. About one third of the enterprises in our survey have experienced that the lack of foreign language skills has had an impact for the enterprise at the international market.

Almost every fourth enterprise have experienced difficulties in negotiations.

Some of the participants in our survey have also directly experienced economic consequences due to the lack of foreign language skills. Nearly four percent of the enterprises have seen losses because of insufficient communication with a business associate, and nearly eight percent have given up ideas about expanding in new markets because of inadequate foreign language skills.

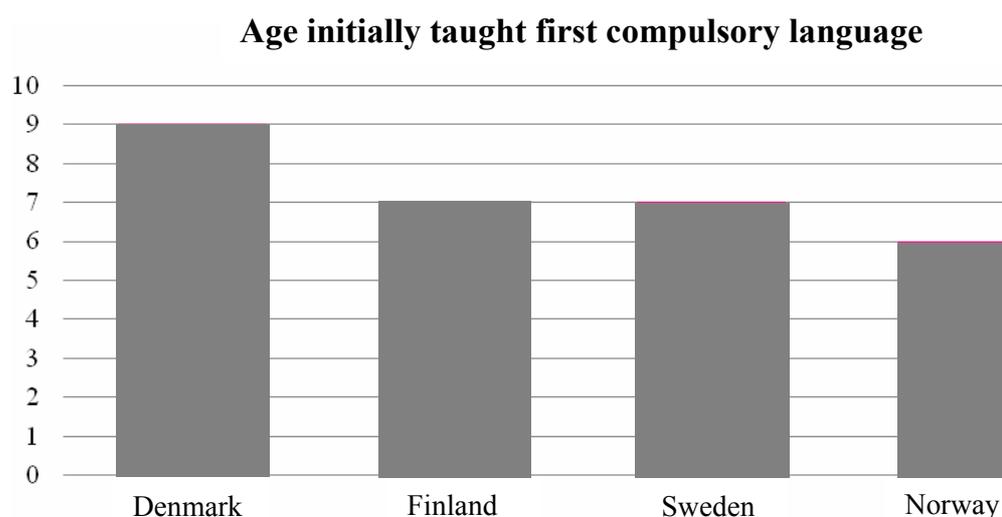
So it will appear that lack of foreign language skills may have very direct economic consequences for an enterprise.

There is, of course, a reason for our interest in this topic: DI's member enterprises need more employees with more foreign language skills.

We would like to correct the misconception that English skills alone are enough, because – as our survey showed – our enterprises need employees with various foreign language skills.

We need to focus on better foreign language skills, and we need to invest in foreign language skills in order to improve.

One way is to start much earlier with foreign language teaching.



Source: Eurydice

In Denmark, children do not receive teaching in English until the age of 9. In comparison, all the other Scandinavian countries introduce the first foreign language 2-3 years earlier.

Holland has, for example, experimented with English lessons for 5-6 years old primary students, letting them “play” with the language at this early a point of their education.

Therefore, Confederation of Danish Industry believes that foreign language teaching in the Danish primary school should start much earlier. At the age of five or six, the children should start off with English teaching through play, fun, and games, and at the age of 11 or 12, Danish students should receive proper teaching in a second foreign language.

Such an initiative would be a good long-term investment in order to strengthen foreign language skills in Denmark.

But such an investment must not be lost. Today, it is not possible for students to maintain their language skills after they have graduated from secondary school (junior high school in the US) or upper secondary school (UK)/High School (US), unless they take a linguistic higher education.

Many of the students have several foreign language skills, when they start University. But because they no longer use their French, German, or other languages, the skills die as time passes, and that is a shame! Especially when our survey shows that enterprises have great need for employees that are able to speak more than just English.

That is why we work for students to get the opportunity to maintain their foreign language skills while they study engineering, economics, or design. In this way, they will be able to speak other languages than English – and thereby reduce the communication difficulties that enterprises meet.