Foreign language skills and intercultural abilities: Operationalization with a large population

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Foreign language skills and intercultural abilities: Operationalization with a large population

Par François Grin72 et Klea Faniko73

Abstract

In this paper, we report on a sample of 6,434 young Swiss men, who answered a questionnaire about their foreign language skills and intercultural abilities. The instrument combines well-established as well as novel attitudinal scales. The focus of the paper is on the operationalisation of variables through the Common European Frame of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ). Preliminary results are also presented, showing a significant relationship between three MPQ dimensions (open-mindedness, cultural empathy and social initiative) and language skills. There was no significant relationship between language skills and the other two dimensions (flexibility, emotional stability). A significant relationship was also found between the nature of respondents’ second language and open-mindedness, social initiative, emotional stability, and flexibility.

Résumé


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This paper is intended as a contribution towards the understanding and estimation of a link, if any, between foreign-language competence on the one hand, and (inter-)cultural abilities on the other hand.

The existence of such a link is often assumed as a matter of course across the social sciences and humanities. However, little is known about the nature and strength of this link. This state of affairs, somewhat paradoxically, reflects the seemingly self-evident nature of the relationship, but also its objective complexity as well as the fact that the positive and normative dimensions of the questions at hand are difficult to disentangle, and are liable get mixed up. But just how accurate is this commonly-held view, and how appropriate is it to assume that more language skills make for more intercultural abilities, or that the former directly map onto the latter? Before considering the relationship between these two terms, it is of course necessary to clarify the sense in which they are used.

The meaning of “linguistic competence” (which, in what follows, refers to skills in a language other than one’s mother tongue) is by now fairly well-established, largely thanks to concerted effort developed over nearly forty years under the auspices of the Council of Europe, and resulting in the Common European Frame of Reference for Language. We shall briefly review the conceptualization and measurement of foreign language competence in Section 2.

“Cultural ability” is another matter altogether, since the meaning of both the terms “culture” and “ability” needs to be clarified, and research offers relatively little in the way of clear consensus in this regard.

As for the first of these two words, the notion generally refers to know-how and capability in dealing with or relating to “other” cultures, or the ability to take cultural difference in stride in one’s everyday life or in a work environment. In this paper, we also focus on something that involves interaction with the “other” or the “different”. By “cultural abilities”, therefore, we mean “intercultural abilities”, as most authors also do. We shall leave aside, for lack of space, the delicate issue of just how “different” the “other” has to qualify as “other”, and what criteria are applied to assess difference, including the respective relevance of etic and emic visions of difference. This paper also does not address the related question of how this difference is manifested and experienced - for example through the semiotics of foreignness, which are located at the interface of the linguistic and the cultural (Brannen, 2004). For our purposes, and in full awareness of the fact that the matter is far from settled, we shall take “difference” as a given, in order...
to focus on actors’ capacity to deal with difference - that is, on their intercultural abilities.

The second question is what we mean by “abilities”. Ideally, we would like to use information on intercultural competencies proper, which would require some direct reference to observed performance in actual tasks. Operating effectively in an intercultural context seems to require specific competencies and abilities (Arthur and Bennett, 1995). However, this would require respondents or developing and collecting some measurements of their performance in real-world interactions. Instead, we use as a proxy information on a plane once removed from competencies. Several instruments have been developed in psychology to generate such information, and Section 3 is devoted to the presentation of one the best-established among these instruments, namely, the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ); in Section 3, we also take a closer look at the distinction between competencies, abilities and orientation.

As just pointed out, the link between linguistic skills and intercultural abilities has generally been assumed, but, to our knowledge, not demonstrated, or at best in incident fashion. Because “language” is routinely associated with “culture”, knowing a foreign language is assumed to imply access to, or ease with a foreign culture (e.g. Judet de la Combe and Wismann, 2008). This may be linked to the fact that authors concerned with one type of skill paid little intention to the other, merely taking the connection for granted; another reason is that the type of data needed to measure this link were simply not available. At least one of two types of limitations apply: on the one hand, observations may bear upon very small populations, appropriate for qualitative treatment but inadequate for quantitative work; on the other hand, information collected on larger samples often lacks the degree of detail required for establishing more than rather general connections.

In this paper, we use of a subset of a large-scale survey of almost 50,000 young residents in Switzerland to take a closer look at language skills, intercultural skills, and the relations between the two. Our focus here is on the methodological aspects, and we shall emphasize the survey and handling of the data in order to assess the operationalization of the complex variables at hand; this is done in Sections 4 and 5. However, some preliminary results, by way of illustration of the method, are presented and commented in Section 5. Let us point out that the quantitative analysis proposed here is not intended as an alternative to the qualitative, often case-study based approaches often encountered in the literature. Rather, these should be seen as mutually complementary perspectives on a complex, multidimensional relationship.

Although the core question of this paper is whether linguistic skills and intercultural abilities are linked, how, and how strongly, we are also interested in the impact of such skills on other variables. In earlier work in the field of language economics, the effect of language skills on various measurements of economic performance has been investigated (Grin, 2003, 2010), and recent work focusing on this
Foreign language skills and intercultural abilities: Operationalization with a large population

connection within the process of value creation (Grin, Sfreddo and Vaillancourt, 2010) has established tentative linkages with the literature on the connections between language and management (e.g. Feely and Harzing, 2003; Frederiksson, Berner-Rasmussen and Piekkari, 2006).

Though not hailing from the discipline of management ourselves, we would like to suggest a few avenues for inter-disciplinary dialogue about the nature and import of the links between language and culture; therefore, in the concluding section of this paper, we discuss the implications, for research on diversity management from distinct perspectives, of the joint consideration of linguistic skills and intercultural abilities.

1. Defining and measuring foreign language skills (FLS)

The concept of linguistic competence has been the object of considerable attention over the last twenty years, and it has progressively coalesced into a set of instruments for the definition and measurement of such skills, in the form of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; see Beacco and Byram, 2007, or the abundant literature on the CEFR available on the Council of Europe website). While such developments may be criticized, either on grounds of their intrinsic limitations or because of the political agendas they can be made to serve (Maurer, 2011), it remains that there is broad consensus on what foreign language skills are, and how they can be assessed. The CEFR offers a practical answer in the debate over the distinction between “skills” and “competencies”: language skills are not abstracted from the communication acts in which they are put to use, but they constitute the basis on which competencies are built and deployed. The two concepts are not identical, but through the descriptors, they map quite naturally onto each other, and it is not essential, for purposes of the present discussion, to operationalize the distinction between them.76

The CEFR is organized in six levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2) corresponding to increasing levels of competence, respectively labeled “breakthrough”, “waystage”, “threshold”, “vantage”, “effective operational proficiency”, and “mastery”. While an “A1” level is associated with very simple communicational acts (exchanging greetings in the foreign language, for example), “C2” implies a level of competence matching that of an educated native speaker. The key feature of the CEFR approach is the self-assessment grid including descriptors, that is, short statements describing speech abilities for each level in five types of skill (listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, and writing). For example, the A1-level competence for “listening” is defined as follows: “I can recognise familiar words and very basic phrases concerning myself, my family and immediate concrete surroundings when people speak slowly and clearly.”

76 A distinction is also made between linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence. These types of competence are different, but generally positively correlated, and we shall leave this distinction aside.
The C2-level competence for “reading” means: “I can read with ease virtually all forms of the written language, including abstract, structurally or linguistically complex texts such as manuals, specialised articles and literary works.”

One attractive feature of the CEFR is that, if one needs fairly homogeneous information about the competence level of respondents, it side-steps the need for actual language testing. Furthermore, it is easily applicable to a large population. Several versions of the core descriptors have been developed in order for them to be readily interpretable by respondents and fit more easily into a questionnaire; descriptors can also be adapted to respondents’ age, or focus on more specific types of language skills, such as those used in particular professions, for example. In the same way, a simplified version of the descriptors has been developed for the purposes of the survey used here. This simplification, however, made it possible to collect more extensive information on language skills: respondents were asked to indicate not just one or two native languages (in which they are assumed to be fluent), but also to mention knowledge of additional languages (up to five more). They were then asked to self-assess their skills level for languages 2, 3 and 4, with reference to simplified CEFR-type descriptors for four types of skills (listening comprehension, oral interaction, reading and writing).

Of course, the information thus gathered can never be perfect, if only because the way in which an actor may use her skills and competently handle an archetypal interaction used as a descriptor depends on a host of idiosyncratic features (degree of tiredness, type or rapport with the interlocutor(s), psychological disposition at a given moment, etc.). However, what matters to us here is not the actual features of one particular, real-world interaction, but being able to rely on a generally dependable tool for the assessment and comparison of language skills across a large number of observations. Owing to the considerable experience developed over the years, and across Europe, in the development and use of descriptors, as well as in their inclusion in various types of surveys, the CEFR is robust enough and well-suited to our purposes.

2. Inter-cultural abilities

We are on much less firm ground when venturing into “inter-cultural” abilities. Just like “culture” is an elusive concept, “inter-cultural abilities” are hard to pin down, and the literature has tended to rely on more or less convincing proxies for cultural otherness, such as “nation”, as in Hofstede’s well-known research (e.g. Hofstede, 1991). Even with large samples, such proxies may be inadequate,
particularly at a time of globalization, where a person with native language A may not only be fluent in language B, but have spent enough time in predominantly B-speaking surroundings to be perfectly attuned to the associated cultural references and norms of behavior. Even in more targeted surveys, like Über Grosse’s (2004) study of the sources of respondents’ success in international contexts, skills are lumped together, as reflected in research questions like “What languages do […] graduates speak, and how did the alumni acquire their foreign language skills and cultural competence?” (2004: 354); what is understood under “speaking a language” and having “cultural competence” may vary greatly among respondents.

However, psychologists have developed measurement instruments to fill this gap. In this paper, we use the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ), designed to evaluate the personality traits that are relevant to multicultural success and multicultural effectiveness (Van der Zee and Oudenhoven, 2000; Van der Zee, Zaal and Peikstra, 2003), assuming that personality traits are related to success in international positions. This questionnaire is in fact a scale that aims at measuring five dimensions: cultural empathy, open-mindedness, emotional stability, social initiative, and flexibility. The MPQ scale is fundamentally a psychological test, which identifies traits. In this sense, the MPQ can be seen as highlighting a general intercultural orientation. At the same time, because many of its items (particularly in the “social initiative” dimension) refer to actual performance (just as the descriptors of the CEFR do), the MPQ is actually located along a continuum between “orientations” and “skills” (“competencies” in the strict sense). Our choice to use the term “abilities”, which emphasizes respondents’ potential for acting in certain ways in given situations, provides a way to characterize the actual focus of the instrument. It is interesting to point out, incidentally, that “cultural empathy” is mentioned in Schneider and Barsoux (2003: 193) among “competencies” (not mere “orientations”) required for managing internationally.

Van der Zee and Oudenhoven (2000: 294) characterize cultural empathy as the “ability to empathize with the feelings, thoughts, and behaviours of members from different cultural groups”. The second dimension, open-mindedness, refers to an unprejudiced attitude towards out-group members as well as different norms, standards, and values – referring to “freedom from prejudice” as a relevant attitude in relation to multicultural effectiveness (Hammer, Gudykunst and Wiseman, 1978). The third dimension, emotional stability, is defined as the “tendency to remain calm in stressful situations versus a tendency to show strong emotional reactions under stressful circumstances” (Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven, 2001: 279), while Hammer et al. (1978) consider emotional stability as the ability to deal with frustration, stress, anxiety, financial problems, and interpersonal conflicts – and an key dimension of intercultural effectiveness. The “social initiative” dimension refers to people’s “tendency to strive for results, to take initiatives and to solve problems”. Finally, “flexibility” refers to the ability to switch easily from one strategy to another, to learn from mistakes and from new
experiences. Let us point out that the MPQ has been used in a wide range of studies. For example, Van der Zee et al., (2003) have found that cultural empathy and social initiative were both positively related to socially oriented vocational interests and flexibility to artistic interests. Cultural empathy, open-mindedness, and flexibility are positively related to verbal intelligence. The MPQ has been used to examine the influence of personality on work outcome; Van der Zee, Astma, and Brodbeck (2004) have shown that emotional stability and flexibility have a positive effect on work outcome under conditions of high diversity, whereas flexibility has a positive effect on exam results under conditions of high diversity.

The full MPQ scale includes 91 brief items with straightforward wording, and respondents are asked to indicate on a five-point scale how well each item applies to them personally. It has already been the object of abundant testing in a variety of contexts and languages. In the present study, which also collected information on a large number of additional variables and where succinctness, consequently, was essential, pre-test results with over 600 respondents have been used to narrow down the list of items from 91 to 43. Our selection preserves the analytical properties of the full MPQ. As we shall see in the following section, the five original dimensions emerge strongly from factor analysis, and they are related in to language skills in systematic ways.

3. Data collection and measurements

3.1. The survey

The data used in the paper have been collected as part of the Swiss “Federal youth surveys” series (Enquêtes fédérales auprès de la jeunesse / Eidgenössische Jugendbefragungen). These surveys take place in blocks of two consecutive years, and concern all the young men, normally aged 19, who report for what is known in Switzerland as “recrutement” (in French), “Rekrutierung” (in German) or “reclutamento” (in Italian), that is, “registration” with the armed forces. It is not a draft, since all young Swiss men are required to report. Although military service remains compulsory in Switzerland, it is preceded by this “registration” procedure lasting approximately two days, during which young men undergo a series of tests. These tests help determine who is actually retained for military service, which lasts for four months (followed by six or seven shorter additional stints over the following years) or is exempted on medical or other grounds. The Federal youth survey is merely one of these tests, taking the form of a questionnaire which all participants in the “registration” (in five different registration centers across the country) must fill out. It is essential to point out, however, that although the context is military, in the sense that “registration” is managed by the army in army barracks, the surveys themselves are entirely independent from it. They are supervised by a parliamentary commission, and the military only provides, as
it were, the setting for the taking of the questionnaire, which is developed by an independent research team.

The surveys are tendered every two years. Biennial cohorts vary in size not only owing to demographic fluctuations, but also because some young people choose to postpone registration by a year; hence, a given data base may include people who ought to have been included in the preceding biennial period, but leave out young people who ought to be present but have postponed their “registration”. In addition, some young men are excused from the survey, because they take part instead in the pre-testing of the questionnaire of the subsequent two-year period (on another topic altogether). Also excluded are young people currently living abroad or those suffering from severe illness or handicap. With these exceptions, therefore, the population surveyed is made up of all young Swiss men aged 19 (or thereabouts) and residing in Switzerland during the two-year period concerned. The survey also includes a small contingent of Swiss women in the same age range who volunteer for the military service. In addition, the survey design includes a representative control sample of approximately 1,500 randomly selected young Swiss women taking the same questionnaire. In what follows, results are reported separately for men and women.\(^79\)

The 60-page questionnaire contains questions on foreign or second language skills, channels of language acquisition, motivations for language learning, attitudes towards and representations of cultural difference, experience of contact with foreign languages and cultures, and a set of questions ranging from standard socioeconomic information to religious orientation and political preference. It has been pre-tested, in German and French, in two successive versions with approximately 600 young men at two registration centers, as well as with a population of 80 students comprising a relative majority of foreign women. The final questionnaire was subsequently translated into Italian.\(^80\)

### 3.2. Population

Starting with an initial population size of 49,190 and following the cleaning up of the data base, the final N included 43,709 respondents (41,878 men and 1,831 women; both the male and female subsample include a small number of randomly selected foreign residents who do not take part in the “registration”, but were nevertheless included in the survey for purposes of comparison of a few basic descriptive statistics). The survey is administered in three languages - one per language region, bearing in mind that with the exception of the very small Romanche-speaking areas, Switzerland’s language regions are sharply demarcated. For the purposes of this paper, which focuses on the measurement of two types of skills and on the relationship between them, we are deliberately

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79. The control sample also includes a small number of randomly selected foreign respondents. The corresponding results are not reported in this paper.
80. Completing the questionnaire requires about 35 minutes on average, depending on a respondent’s literacy, which can vary significantly, considering that the survey is taken by the entirety of the cohort of young men in the population with Swiss citizenship.
leaving out variability due to language region, gender or citizenship, and concentrating on a subset of the total sample, namely, Swiss male citizens who have taken the questionnaire in French and who have declared French as their first language (N = 6,434).

3.3. Measurements

Language skills in languages other than a respondents’ first language were coded on a seven-point scale from ‘0’ (denoting the absence of skills in the language concerned) to ‘6’, matching a C2 level on the CEFR. Respondents' self-assessment scores on four types of skills (listening comprehension, oral interaction, reading and writing) were averaged to produce the foreign language skills index (FLSI) used here. In this paper, we focus on second languages, leaving out skills in additional (third, fourth, etc.) languages; however, since respondents were asked to report their skills in successive languages in decreasing order of familiarity, their average level in L3, L4, etc. is generally lower than their average level in L2, making the latter a good proxy for their foreign-language skills more generally.

Intercultural ability is assessed through 43 items out of the original 91 of the Multicultural personality questionnaire (MPQ) (Van der Zee et al., 2003). Participants report the extent to which a statement applies to them on a five-point scale from 1 (“strongly disagrees”) to 5 (“strongly agrees”). The MPQ generates five dimensions; here are examples of items from each of these dimensions81, along with their respective Cronbach’s alpha82:

- **open-mindedness** was assessed using 8 items like: “Seeks contact with people from a different background,” and “Gets involved in other cultures” (α = .85);
- **cultural empathy** was assessed using 9 items like: “Notices when someone is in trouble,” and “Understands other people’s feelings” (α = .83);
- **social initiative** was assessed using 9 items like: “Easily approaches other people,” and “Is often the driving force behind things” (α = .80);
- **emotional stability** was assessed using 9 items like: “Keeps calm at ill-luck,” [sic] and “Is afraid to fail” (reverse-scored) (α = .81);
- **flexibility** was assessed using 8 items like: “Works mostly according to a strict scheme” (reverse-scored) and “Avoids from adventure” [sic] (α = .75).

81. The original questionnaire was developed in Dutch. The occasionally slightly odd translations into English provided here are from Van der Zee and van Oudenhoven (2001); our survey used neither of these, but professional translations into French, German and Italian.

82. Cronbach’s alpha is a coefficient of reliability and it is used as a measure of internal consistency (Cronbach, 1951).
4. Results

In what follows, we focus on data on second-language skills collected through our CEFR-based instrument, and inter-cultural skills collected through our selection of MPQ items.

Most French-speaking Swiss men reported German (39.9%) or English (39%) as their second language (Table 1). The other important second languages are Italian (6.3%), Spanish (3.6%), followed by Portuguese (2.8%), Albanian (2.2%), Slavic languages of the former Yugoslavia (1.6%) and Turkish (0.7%). Other languages like Arabic, Chinese, Russian, African languages, Asian languages, and other European languages are (for the purposes of this table) grouped under “other”; they are the second language of 3.8% of participants.

Respondents’ relationship towards their respective second language may of course be quite different, in the sense that for native speakers of French, living in French-speaking Switzerland, who have studied German and English at school and possibly undergone a couple of weeks’ language immersion in Berlin or Brighton, the second language is primarily an element of human capital acquired as such. For a second-generation immigrant from a Spanish-speaking background who has acquired Swiss citizenship and considers French his first language, but maintains fluency in Spanish for communication with his parents or grandparents, the second language most probably takes on another meaning as a component of identity building. Nevertheless, the approach to language skills through descriptors minimizes biases that may proceed from differences in the way language and identity are connected.
Table 1
Second language skills by average skills level (percentages) and average proficiency score

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>L2</th>
<th>N, (%)</th>
<th>none</th>
<th>A1</th>
<th>A2</th>
<th>B1</th>
<th>B2</th>
<th>C1</th>
<th>C2</th>
<th>Score&lt;sup&gt;(1)&lt;/sup&gt; mean (median)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>German&lt;sup&gt;(2)&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>2,351</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>4.50 (5.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>2,296</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>6.47 (6.67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian&lt;sup&gt;(3)&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>369</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>38.7</td>
<td>8.33 (7.63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>48.6</td>
<td>8.28 (8.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>56.8</td>
<td>8.33 (10.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albanian</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>54.4</td>
<td>8.63 (10.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLFY&lt;sup&gt;(4)&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>8.53 (10.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkish</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>48.9</td>
<td>8.45 (8.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>6.67 (6.67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5,887</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>52.1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>(1)</sup> original scores from the 1 to 7 scale have been projected on a 0 to 10 scale for easier interpretation
<sup>(2)</sup> includes respondents indicating German or Swiss-German dialect or both as a second language
<sup>(3)</sup> includes respondents indicating Italian or an Italian-based dialect as a second language
<sup>(4)</sup> Slavic languages of former Yugoslavia

In order to study the relationship between language skills and intercultural abilities, we carried out principal-components analysis (PCA) using SPSS with a promax rotation. The five factors generated by the analysis closely fit Van der Zee et al.’s findings (2003): open-mindedness (factor 1, with an eigenvalue of 7.21 and accounting for 16.76% of the variance); cultural empathy factor (factor 2, with an eigenvalue of 5.31, accounting for 12.35% of the variance); social initiative (factor 3, with an eigenvalue of 3.16, accounting for 7.35% of the variance); emotional stability (factor 4, with an eigenvalue of 2.11, accounting for 4.91% of the variance); and flexibility (factor 5, with an eigenvalue of 1.80, accounting for 4.18% of the variance). For the following analyses, responses on the items respectively associated with each dimension were averaged for each observation to create an overall score for open-mindedness, cultural empathy, social initiative, emotional stability and flexibility; the means of these individual scores are then examined as a function of L2 skills level and L2 type.
We then carried out a series of variance analyses on different dimensions of the MPQ, confronting them with language skills (“none” v. A1 v. A2 v. B1 v. B2 v. C1 v. C2) and L2 (German v. English v. Italian v. South-Western European languages v. Central and Eastern European languages) as between-subject predictors. The results showed a significant effect of the level of language skills on three dimensions, namely, open-mindedness $F(33, 5545) = 12.23, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .02$, cultural empathy $F(33, 5545) = 1.370, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .01$, and social initiative $F(33, 5545) = 3.437, p < .005, \eta_p^2 = .01$. The results did not show a significant effect of language skills on the other two dimensions, emotional stability and flexibility (Table 2).

Let us now take a closer look at some of these effects. The relationship between the level of language skills and the open-mindedness score mean suggests a linear pattern of gradual increase in the the open-mindedness score, which moves from the lowest level (among respondents with no foreign language skills) ($M = 2.31, SD = .73$) to the highest level (C2) ($M = 3.21, SD = .81$) of respondents’ language skills according the self-assessment grid. Multiple comparisons between the seven levels of language skills (none to C2) showed a significant difference between all of them ($p < .001$).

Which language respondents have as a second language also matters: results revealed a significant effect of language type on the open-mindedness score $F(33, 5545) = 6.015, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .02$. The mean open-mindedness score was higher for the participants who declared South-West European and Central/Eastern European languages as their second language ($M = 3.14, SD = .80; M = 3.09, SD = .72$, respectively) than for those who declared German, English or Italian as their second language ($M = 2.68, SD = .83; M = 2.98, SD = .82; M = 2.95, SD = 85$, respectively) ($p < .01$)83.

In line with the preceding findings, the analysis of cultural empathy showed a gradual positive evolution of the cultural empathy score from the lowest level (“none”) ($M = 3.34, SD = .71$) to the highest level (C2) ($M = 3.73, SD = .62$) as L2 skills increase. Multiple comparisons between the seven levels of the language skills variable showed a significant difference between them ($p < .005$) except between the A1 and A2 levels ($p = ns$). The nature of the second language, however, turned out to make no significant difference to the cultural empathy score.

As regards the social initiative dimension, the analysis does not suggest a pattern of gradual increase matching the rise in second language skills (with “no” L2 skills, we observe $M = 3.36, SD = .65$, as opposed to $M = 3.55, SD = .67$ at the C2 level of competence in L2) of the respondents’ language skills. Multiple comparisons revealed no significant differences between the mean score of the participants whose language skills was evaluated as “none” ($M = 3.36, SD = .65$),

83. Only significant differences between the languages are reported.
A1 ($M = 3.42, SD = .63$), A2 ($M = 3.44, SD = .63$), B1 ($M = 3.41, SD = .64$) and B2 ($M = 3.99, SD = .65$) ($p = ns$). The main difference occurred between extreme levels, namely “none” (reported above), C1 ($M = 3.49, SD = .63$) and C2 ($M = 3.55, SD = .67$) ($p < .005$).

Table 2
MPQ dimension scores by level of language skills and by L2
Mean values (SD in brackets)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language skills effect</th>
<th>Open-mindedness</th>
<th>Cultural empathy</th>
<th>Social initiative</th>
<th>Emotional stability</th>
<th>Flexibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>p &lt; .001</td>
<td>p &lt; .001</td>
<td>p &lt; .005</td>
<td>p = ns</td>
<td>p = ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>3.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.73)</td>
<td>(.71)</td>
<td>(.65)</td>
<td>(.76)</td>
<td>(.64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>3.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.73)</td>
<td>(.62)</td>
<td>(.63)</td>
<td>(.69)</td>
<td>(.64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>3.23</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.82)</td>
<td>(.64)</td>
<td>(.63)</td>
<td>(.70)</td>
<td>(.65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B1</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>3.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.79)</td>
<td>(.62)</td>
<td>(.64)</td>
<td>(.70)</td>
<td>(.67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>3.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.79)</td>
<td>(.61)</td>
<td>(.65)</td>
<td>(.72)</td>
<td>(.68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>3.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>(.79)</td>
<td>(.63)</td>
<td>(.63)</td>
<td>(.72)</td>
<td>(.66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
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<td>3.73</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>3.30</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(.81)</td>
<td>(.62)</td>
<td>(.67)</td>
<td>(.73)</td>
<td>(.67)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language effect</th>
<th>p &lt; .001</th>
<th>p = ns</th>
<th>p &lt; .001</th>
<th>p &lt; .005</th>
<th>p &lt; .005</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>German (1)</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>3.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.83)</td>
<td>(.64)</td>
<td>(.64)</td>
<td>(.71)</td>
<td>(.66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>3.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.82)</td>
<td>(.62)</td>
<td>(.65)</td>
<td>(.72)</td>
<td>(.67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian (2)</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>3.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.85)</td>
<td>(.66)</td>
<td>(.65)</td>
<td>(.74)</td>
<td>(.65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWEL (3)</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>3.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.80)</td>
<td>(.63)</td>
<td>(.64)</td>
<td>(.68)</td>
<td>(.62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEEL (4)</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>2.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.72)</td>
<td>(.64)</td>
<td>(.59)</td>
<td>(.71)</td>
<td>(.58)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(1) includes respondents indicating German or Swiss-German dialect or both as a second language
(2) includes respondents indicating Italian or an Italian-based dialect as a second language
(3) South-west European languages: Spanish, Catalan, Portuguese (incl. Brazilian Portuguese)
(4) Central and Eastern European languages: Albanian, Armenian, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Croatian, Czech, Greek, Hungarian, Macedonian, Polish, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Serbo-Croatian, Vlach.
The results revealed a significant effect of language type on the social initiative score $F(33, 5545) = 1.130, p < .005, \eta^2_p = .00$. The social initiative score is highest for the participants who declare a Central or Eastern European language as their L2 ($M = 3.57, SD = .59$), and lowest for the participants who declare English ($M = 3.41, SD = .65$) as their second language ($p < .01$).

The data revealed no significant effect of language skills on the emotional stability score, but a significant effect of language $F(33, 5545) = 1.142, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .00$. Participants who declared German, English, or a Central or Eastern European language as their L2 ($M = 3.29, SD = .71$; $M = 3.27, SD = .72$; $M = 3.27, SD = .71$ respectively) scored higher on emotional stability than those who declared Italian as a second language ($M = 3.19, SD = .74$) ($p < .05$).

Finally, language also mattered to the flexibility dimension $F(33, 5545) = 4.227, p < .005, \eta^2_p = .00$. The mean flexibility score was higher for the participants who reported English a ($M = 3.16, SD = .67$) and lower for participants who reported a Central or Eastern European language as a second language ($M = 2.84, SD = .58$) ($p < .03$). Table 2 provides a general overview of these results.

5. Discussion: implications of the language-culture link

The foregoing results, though exploratory in nature, make the following propositions strongly plausible.

First, language skills are intercultural skills are probably correlated. Quite apart from the direction of causality (if any) underpinning this connection (a point addressed below), the very existence of this link carries major implications.

Some of them are political: at a time when, as a result of globalization, contact (or confrontation) with cultural “otherness” is becoming an increasingly unavoidable feature of social life for a majority of citizens, the teaching of foreign languages may serve not only communicational objectives, but also the fostering of more harmonious inter-group relations in plural societies (which some commentators describe as being not just diverse, but “hyper-diverse”).

Other implications are closer to management issues: when a company seeks to identify, among its employees or applicants for a job, those best suited to a posting that is highly exposed to “otherness”, the presence of higher foreign language skills will generally be a good proxy for the ability to take this “otherness” in stride and handle it well in a professional context. This goes beyond the emphasis on communication (and the implicit casting of linguistic diversity as a problem to be solved) usually encountered in the managerial literature on multilingualism (e.g. Marschan-Piekkari, Welch and Welch, 1999; Feely and Hartzing, 2003; Frederiksson, Barner-Rasmussen and Piekkari, 2006; Harzing and Feely, 2007). Another way in which our results might help to broaden the outlook on diversity...
in this strand of research has to do with the fact that the managerial literature tends to focus on communication issues in multinational corporations. However, precisely because of the diversification of the labor force at any given spot, contact with cultural and linguistic difference increasingly occurs within SMEs supplying a local market. Efficient teamwork within the organization also depends on the appropriate handling of internal diversity, and higher language skills may be a cost-effective way of approaching that goal.

The second main implication from our findings is that intercultural competence is far from being as simple as is often assumed. Not only is the multidimensionality of intercultural competence, already established in the social psychological literature on the MPQ and other instruments, confirmed; we also find that different facets of intercultural competence are linked to other skills (in this case: FL skills) in different ways. In our population of young men, higher FL skills are associated with greater open-mindedness, higher cultural empathy and social initiative, but not necessarily with more emotional stability or flexibility. Quite apart from the obvious relevance of investigating these statistical links at closer range (for example by checking if they also obtain independently of other variables - see below), this suggests that the matching between a person and a given post could be fine-tuned by taking account of the type of intercultural skills required in that post. This finding dovetails with the notion that dimensions such as open-mindedness, cultural empathy and social initiative can be positioned at the inter-personal or group level (Doise, 1982; 1984) and can directly influence interaction between the individual and his or her social environment. Dimensions such as flexibility and emotional stability can be situated at the intra-personal level and their effects on social interaction are more limited relative to the other dimensions.

Thirdly, the fact that a person’s intercultural skills is not independent of the nature of his or her L2 is intriguing. While this result is difficult to interpret in the case of “grouped” languages (like SWEL and CEEL in Table 2), the differences among (generally native) speakers of French between those who have English, German or Italian as an L2 gives rise to a whole new range of hypotheses that deserve closer scrutiny - keeping clear, of course, of the possible lapse into clichéd views of language and ethnicity. We nevertheless observe (sticking to those dimensions in which the null hypothesis of independence may be rejected) that not all inter-cultural skills are equally associated with any FL skills. For example, social initiative appears to be more strongly associated with having German or Italian as an L2, while flexibility is most closely associated with having English as an L2.

These are, however, only exploratory results that require closer examination. Two avenues deserve priority.

The first is to move from bivariate to multivariate analyses using ordinary least squares (OLS), starting with models where, in line with intuitive representations,
intercultural skills are the dependent variable and FL skills are featured as independent variables. The strength of the associations already detected (as well as very preliminary analyses not reported here) suggest that the effect will hold, but it is essential to assess how other variables (such as a respondent’s education, his parents’ educational level or socioeconomic status, etc.) may affect the strength of the relationship.

The second is to test the direction of causality through structural equation modeling. The positive association between intercultural and FL skills makes immediate intuitive sense, and it is very likely that they reinforce each other, but the question that remains is whether the influence flows relatively more strongly in one direction or another. Shedding more light on this question also carries major implications for public-sector policy development as well as private-sector management practices.

References


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