

The Role of English Language Proficiency in International Opportunity Recognition and Exploitation: The Case of Iranian Pars Special Economic Energy Zone (PSEEZ)

Hossein Ekbatani¹, Nasim Ghanbari², Reza Mohammadkazemi³

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Abstract

Numerous studies have shown that the language proficiency of the decision-makers and managers in the oil industry considerably affects the recognition and exploitation of international opportunities. Accordingly, the present interdisciplinary study was conducted to examine the role of English language proficiency in international opportunity recognition and exploitation in the Iranian Pars Special Economic Energy Zone (PSEEZ). For this purpose, a survey questionnaire was developed by the researcher to gather data from PSEEZ companies as the context of the study. Overall, a body of 120 executive managers in PSEEZ participated in the study. SPSS software was used for the analysis of the data. The analysis of the findings showed that English language proficiency had a positive and significant relationship with the recognition and exploitation of international opportunities. This study calls for a more pronounced role of English in the region to further enhance the international opportunities of PSEEZ. The study has also several implications for the English for specific purposes (ESP) domain.

Keywords: English language proficiency, entrepreneurship, ESP, executive managers, international opportunity recognition, international opportunity exploitation.

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1. MSc. Student, Department of English Language and Literature, Persian Gulf University, Bushehr, Iran. h.ekbatani@ut.ac.ir

2. Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Persian Gulf University, Bushehr, Iran (Corresponding author). btghanbari@pgu.ac.ir

3. Professor, Faculty of Entrepreneurship, Tehran University, Tehran, Iran. r.mkazemi@ut.ac.ir



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Introduction

The theoretical grounds underpinning the present study come from three major fields of inquiry: (1) the entrepreneurial opportunity recognition and exploitation, (2) the language employment in multi-national companies (MNCs), and (3) the internationalization process theory. Language has often been inspected with regard to MNCs and at the corporate level. For instance, researchers have shown ample interest in the corporate language choice, language management within the MNCs, and policies regarding language. On the other hand, some studies have examined language at the level of individuals, for instance, from the standpoint of job opportunities (Vaara, et al., 2005), interunit communication (Barner-Rasmussen & Bjorkman, 2005), and as a source of power and an obstacle or facilitator of interorganizational communication (Marschan-Piekkari, et al., 1999).

Language has been investigated in early studies on the successful internationalization of the companies (Vinnikainen, 2022). For instance, Johanson and Vahlne (1977) asserted that the internationalization of companies occurs through increasing commitments to foreign markets and that a determinative factor in the process is how the decision-makers perceive the psychic distance between home and host markets. Language is one of the important components of experienced psychic experienced (Dow & Karunaratna, 2006; O'Grady & Lane, 1996), and insufficient language skills can be a significant barrier to internationalization (Eriksson, et al., 1997). Although researchers still consider the language to be an obstacle to internationalization, quite a few studies have also indicated that the language skills of the decision-makers may improve a company's likelihood of expanding internationally (Fernandez-Ortiz & Lombardo, 2009; Holzmuller & Kasper, 1990). However, few studies have considered the language as an asset in the internationalization process.

Considering the above mentioned issues, the present research was conducted to find out whether the linguistic competence of the decision-maker played a role in the recognition and exploitation of international opportunities in the context of Pars Special Economic Energy Zone (PSEEZ), a subsidiary of

the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC). Therefore, with advances in technology and increasing complexities of the global/local economies and political relations, these enterprises have every reason to foster effective communication and interaction with industrial countries to be better able to recognize and exploit opportunities in global markets. Described as one of its objectives, PSEEZ sought to provide the appropriate prerequisites to attract local and foreign partnership with the aim of developing oil, gas and petrochemical industries, as well as interrelated and downstream industries. Therefore, the present study was an attempt to address the following research questions:

1. How do the PSEEZ executive managers perceive the role of English language proficiency in recognizing and exploiting international opportunities?
2. Is there any relationship between different components of English language proficiency and the demographic information of the participants in PSEEZ?

Literature Review

In order to compete in the global job market, employees must be able to communicate effectively. In this context, proficiency in English language as a communication skill is considered increasingly important in employment (Erling, et al., 2012; Fast, 2021; Kossoudji, 1988; Rivera-Batiz, 1990; Vinnikainen, 2022; Shields & Price, 2002) all over the world. Moreover, the process of globalization has had a huge impact on the labor market because it allows skilled workers to move from one place to another, from one country to another, and from one region of the world to another. The globalization of human capital is widely manifested through international migration from developing to industrialized countries (Khadria, 2001). Furthermore, globalization is closely connected to the English language itself. Both globalization and the English language are believed to serve as pull factors for one another, having a significant impact on employment (Debrah & Smith, 2002). They have also been linked to significant labor market changes (Orbeta,

2002). The combination of globalization and the English language have paved the way for local actors to join global networks (Sassen, 2016). Take for example a non-English-speaking migrant, he or she might work in an English-speaking environment where his local English is used in a global context. In this context, indeed, his level of English is critical to his employment trajectory in a global society.

In today's job environment, language skills are a must-have. Several researchers (Casale & Posel, 2011; Dustmann & Fabbri, 2003; Leslie & Lindley, 2001; Lindley, 2002; Schellekens, 2001), have looked into the relationship between English language proficiency and labor market success, advantages, and failures. Chiswick and Miller (2007) conducted a number of empirical investigations on the relationship between migrants' language skills and their salaries in host countries. They suggest that having a good command of a foreign language has a positive impact on an individual's income.

According to Brannen et al. (2014), scholars address language challenges in business from a variety of perspectives. Three aspects of language are particularly significant among the various conceptualizations of the language they use: national languages spoken in MNCs, officially mandated corporate languages, and English as the language of global business. Many researchers concentrate on the national languages of corporate headquarters and geographically distributed subsidiaries, which are spoken alongside one another in MNCs (Angouri, 2014), blending in employees' speech (Janssens & Steyaert, 2014), and so producing linguascapes (Steyaert et al., 2011). Others have focused on the concept of a common corporate language, which is most commonly defined as an administrative managerial tool (Latukha, 2016) serving as a facilitator or a barrier to internal and external communication (Piekkari et al., 2005). Beyond top management system's common but simplistic understanding that a specific national language (mostly English) must always be used (Berthoud et al., 2015), scholars have begun to recognize the complexities of common corporate languages, which often reflect the industrial context and the national language environment in the country of origin (Brannen et al., 2014; Brannen & Doz, 2012). The third component of

language that is commonly explored in business is the role of English. International business scholars conceptualize English as a hegemonic force (Tietze & Dick, 2013), which recreates postcolonial power structures or as a more neutral communicative tool in the form of business English as a lingua franca (BELF) depending on their disciplinary socialization (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010). Other researchers have looked into the interaction of national and corporate languages with English (Kuznetsov & Kuznetsova, 2014). Language-related economics research emerged significantly independently of those streams of literature. This economic stream explores the impact of semantic structures in national languages on economic behavior at the country level, such as future-time reference (Chen, 2013) or gender marking (Hicks et al., 2015). Linguistic distance, or how difficult it is for speakers of one language to learn other languages (Hutchinson, 2005), is commonly used in cross-national economic research as a predictor of trade patterns and other results (Sauter, 2012; Melitz & Toubal, 2014).

Lindley (2002) investigates the disparities in earnings between fluent and non-fluent ethnic male and female minorities as well as the factors that can influence English language fluency in the United Kingdom and found that lack of fluency has a major impact on the average earnings of both ethnic groups of minorities in Britain. It is concluded that English language insufficiency in vocations and occupations may come at a price.

In a study of Hispanic and East Asian immigrant men's labor market opportunities, Kossoudji (1988) claims that a lack of English is costly in terms of earning and occupational mobility. At every skill level, she discovered that Hispanics pay a larger price for shortcoming in English language than Asians. Schellekens (2001) also found that lack of English competence is a barrier to employment in England and Wales. For example, people are employed in the jobs that are considerably below their skills and experiences. Similarly, in a developing country like South Africa, it has been discovered that those who are very good at reading and writing and have a tertiary degree are likely to make a lot of money (Casale & Posel, 2011). Tainer (1988) claims that English language competency acts as a determinant of earnings and plays an important role in

the earnings of foreign-born ethnic groups when considering language as a human capital. Furthermore, a lack of language skills limits one's ability to obtain positions that fully acknowledge one's qualifications. Shields and Price (2002) claim in a study on ethnic minorities in the United Kingdom that English language fluency has a significant impact on occupational advantages and success. To summarize the findings of the previous studies, it can be concluded that English proficiency has a significant impact on the labor market, particularly in countries where English is the primary language of the host country. English language fluency has also been linked to a higher wage in a variety of circumstances, according to studies. English language knowledge is one of the most crucial determining elements in landing a job, earning a higher income and gaining other benefits in the labor market. As a result, fluency in the English language has been seen as a form of human capital (Dustmann, 1999; Dustmann & Fabbri, 2003).

The success of the labor market is determined by a number of factors. It is claimed that employers prioritize graduates' profession-specific qualifications in the job market, followed by their *well-roundedness*, which refers to personal characteristics and attributes, including English language competence (Arkoudis et al., 2009). According to Syed and Murray (2009), English language proficiency is required for the majority of jobs in Australia. Other studies have found that knowing English is essential for getting hired and succeeding in the job market. The better the English, the higher the engagement rates (DIMIA, 2005). Similarly, the LSIA found that migrants with higher levels of qualifications and English language ability have better job, income, and occupational position in comparison to migrants with lower levels of such human capital characteristics (Ho & Alcorso, 2004; Syed & Murray, 2009). Ho and Alcorso (2004) used LSIA data to show the employment outcomes of English and non-English speaking migrants in relation to their birthplace. They discovered that comparing migrants from English-speaking backgrounds to migrants from non-English-speaking backgrounds, the first cohort outperforms the second cohort in terms of employment outcomes (i.e., employment and unemployment rates, occupational status, and qualification utilization).

According to research, the lack of English language skills acts as a barrier to labor market attainment and success (Stevens, 2005) and can result in job loss (Syed & Murray, 2009).

To investigate the association between knowledge of one or more foreign languages and adult Europeans' employment status, Araújo et al. (2015) used logistic regressions with data from Eurostat's Adult Education Survey (AES) 2011. This study found a link between employment and English knowledge in Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Slovenia. Moreover, English language proficiency is linked to a higher likelihood of employment in Cyprus, Spain, and Finland. Those who know at least some French are more likely to find a job position in Malta, German speakers are more likely to find a job in Denmark, and Russian speakers are more likely to find a job in Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. However, there are three shortcomings in this paper. First, it presents the coefficients of the models used, but it does not calculate the marginal effects. While this allows the authors to analyze the strength of existing correlations, no conclusions regarding their magnitude can be formed. Second, disparities in the language–employment link between men and women are not investigated. Finally, the study of the association between employment and language skills is flawed since it only looks at English and only at a very high degree of proficiency.

Roshid and Chowdhury (2013) investigated the previously unexplored relationship between English language proficiency and employment as well as the success of Bangladeshi graduates in Australia in order to determine how English language skills influence the employment mechanism in the Australian job market for graduates from non-English speaking South East Asian countries. The study used an interpretive method in order to better understand the role of university graduates' English language skills in determining their employment prospects and career prospects in Australia. It was discovered that one's English language skills can influence career prospects in a variety of ways, particularly in terms of contributing to the possibility of more secure and better positions.

Hurmerinta et al. (2015) studied the role of language skills in recognizing and exploiting international opportunities. A mixed-methods research strategy was used in their research to obtain data from Finnish food sector companies. The decision-maker's knowledge of a foreign language was found to be related to international opportunity recognition and exploitation, potentially establishing a knowledge corridor that either favors or prohibits international opportunity recognition. This knowledge corridor was investigated using the matching linguistic knowledge concept. According to the findings, managers' recognition of foreign opportunities is guided by matching linguistic knowledge although the value of the knowledge corridor has reduced with the introduction of Business English.

Method

Context of the Study

PSEEZ consists of three regions: Pars one (South Pars), Pars two (Pars Kangan), and Pars three (North Pars) which on the whole included an approximately 46,000-hectare area. PSEEZ was established with the purpose of supporting the development of the world's largest gas field (South Pars Shared gas field). Since its foundation in 1998, PSEEZ has been responsible for establishing required infrastructures, such as access roads, electricity, drinking water, and any welfare facilities to support gas production. It was also required to transfer these infrastructures to different parts of the country. In a ten-year period from 1999 to 2009, around 35 billion dollars has been invested in various upstream and downstream sectors in South Pars. Ten out of twenty-four phases of South Pars have, so far, come on stream. By 2009, foreign entities had invested some 36 billion dollars in the PSEEZ in a span of 10 years. To materialize the targets of the 20-year outlook, based on strategic decisions made by the Petroleum Ministry, over 200 billion dollars will have been invested by the end of the fifth five-year plan, 40 percent of which has been allocated to refinery phases in PSEEZ. The huge volume of investment leads to the vast fundamental developments in national and regional level. This further demonstrates the need for research in this field which will be the first of its

kind in the country. It must be further taken into account that the companies operating in PSEEZ may have been forced to use entirely without or little English language in their activities owing to imposed sanctions on Iran. This might have adverse effects on the research outcome.

Table 1

Demographic Information of the Participants in the Study

Variable	Groups	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	96	80.0
	Female	22	18.3
Age	24 -29	15	12.5
	30-36	38	31.7
	37-43	47	39.2
	Over 44	18	15.0
Education	B.A.	37	30.8
	M.A.	64	53.3
	Ph.D.	14	11.7
English learning method	College	31	25.8
	Self-study	32	26.7
	Language Institute	48	40.0
	In-service courses	4	3.3
	No	3	2.5
Experience of marketing trips	No experience	44	36.7
	Once	41	34.2
	Twice	8	6.7
	Three times	9	7.5
	More than 3	18	15.0

Design of the Study

For the purpose of the current study, a survey design was adopted.

Participants

The present research used the companies in the Pars Special Energy Economic Zone (PSEEZ) as its sample to examine the role of English language competency in international opportunity recognition and exploitation. The participants consisted of 120 executive managers from Pars Special Energy Economic Zone (PSEEZ) who were selected utilizing the simple random sampling procedure. Descriptive statistics were used to examine the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

The results of Table 1 show that out of 120 respondents, the majority (96 people, 0.80%) were men and most of them were in the age groups of 30-36 (38 people, 31.7%). In addition, the English language skill level of these managers was mostly at the intermediate level (65 individuals, 54.2%). The mother tongue of the majority of the participants (107 individuals, 89.2%) was Persian and the rest being (Arabic (1.7%), Kurdish (0.8%), Lori (0.8%) or Turkish (4.2%)). In terms of academic degrees, 37 participants had a bachelor's degree (30.8%), 64 participants had a master's degree (53.3%), and 11 participants had a Ph.D. degree (11%). The participants mostly have learnt English by attending English language classes in private institutes (48 individuals, 40%). Many of the participants (44 individuals, 36.7%) had not made any overseas business trips and 41 participants (34.2%) had made just one international business trip.

In addition, table 2 depicted work experience of all managers and decision makers in PSEEZ.

Table 2

Results of Central Indicators and Dispersion Measures for the Work Experience Variable

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Work experience	13.9279	6.33707	1.00	40.00

The results of Table 2 show that the average work experience of the respondents is 13.927 in terms of years. The Min and Max values for this

variable is 1.00 and 40.00, respectively.

Instrumentation

In this study, a questionnaire was developed by the researchers to investigate the role of English in international opportunity recognition and exploitation at PSEEZ. To develop the items, the researchers conducted an extensive survey of the literature (Hurmerinta, et al., 2015). In addition, the researchers interviewed ten PSEEZ managers to gain insights about the place of English language in their job in the region. The interview phase of the study showed the areas of concern among Iranian EFL raters. These areas (i.e. themes) acted as guidelines to further develop the questionnaire in the study. In other words, in writing the questionnaire items, the researchers used the ideas of the experienced managers at PSEEZ in the interview sessions. The first draft of the questionnaire included 35 items which asked the participants to respond on a five-point Likert-like scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

After the first draft of the questionnaire was developed, to ensure the content validity of the questionnaire, a group of 10 people including 5 English language experts and 5 experienced managers at PSEEZ were asked to reflect on the simplicity, clarity, and readability of the items of instrument. In addition, they were asked to find the correspondence between the items in the questionnaire and the related sub-scale, that is, the experts were asked to indicate what items make a cluster, and are therefore related to one main concept. This resulted in five major concepts: (i) the items related to English language knowledge, (ii) the items related to work-related knowledge, (iii) the items related to English language in the market, (iv) the items related to English language competence outsourcing, and (v) the items related to digitalization. The general consensus among the experts over the underlying constructs of the questionnaire confirmed the content validity of the questionnaire. This indicated that the experts had classified the items in the same clusters. To improve the clarity of the scale, the unclear statements and minor wording errors were changed according to the experts' views. Approximately, eight

questions were rewritten. The internal consistency of the sub-scales was measured by Cronbach's Alpha was 0.87. Based on the literature (Cronbach, 1951; Landis & Koch, 1997); the estimate of Alpha being equal to or higher than 0.70 is considered as a satisfactory reliability measure.

The final version of the questionnaire consisted of 29 items in five domains, including English language knowledge, work-related knowledge, English language in the market, English language competence outsourcing and digitalization. It was based on Likert scale and ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree (1 to 5). The questionnaire was created in Google Docs and administered via links through e-mail, WhatsApp, and Telegram (Appendix I).

Data Collection Procedure

One of the most important parts of the research was the piloting step as it enabled detection of the unforeseeable minute points and problems with the instruments of the main study, and in this way, it prevented a great deal of frustration and possible extra work later on (Dornyei & Taguchi, 2009). Regarding this, the researcher designed a pilot study. The most important purpose was to allocate the time limit and find out the weaknesses of the research instruments to be eradicated in their final versions.

The data collection procedure took place in two steps. In the first step, the questionnaire survey began with questions on demographic backgrounds of the participants to draw a general picture of the industry, followed by the second step involving questions connected with experience in international opportunity recognition and exploitation in order to obtain the required data for analysis.

Data Analysis

Findings of research questionnaire were analyzed using SPSS (version 22) software. The researcher took advantage of the independent-sample t-test to find the probable effect of managers' English language proficiency on facilitating international opportunities. In addition, the normality status of the data was examined.

Results

Investigating the First Research Question

In order to examine how managers and decision-makers perceived the role of English language in recognizing and exploiting international opportunities in the PSEEZ, the descriptive features of the research variables are examined separately in different tables based on the central tendency measures, such as the mean, standard deviation, and skewness.

Table 3

Central Indicators and Dispersion Measures Related to Knowledge of the English Language

Item	Std.			
	Mean	Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
English Language Knowledge	23.1456	3.55093	12.00	30.00
Written and oral forms	4.462	0.848		
Significant role of English in the workplace	4.233	0.976		
Whether Business English is different from general English	4.008	0.835		
Subject matter and English language knowledge measure employees' knowledge	4.158	0.756		
Teaching courses are offered in the English language	2.908	1.209		
Learning English and other languages	3.375	1.969		

As depicted in Table 3, Indices of mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) for managers and decision-makers' English language knowledge skill are 23.14 and 3.55, respectively. The first subskill of English language knowledge is knowledge of written and oral form with M=4.46 and SD=0.84. The values of M and SD defined for significant role of English in workplace are 4.23 and 0.97, respectively. In addition, M and SD for the difference between business English and general English are 4.00 and 0.83, respectively. The values of M and SD for measuring employees' English knowledge are 4.15 and 0.75. Next, the value of M for offering courses in English is 2.90 and its SD was calculated as 1.20. Finally, the index of M regarding learning English and other languages is 3.37 and its attributed SD is 1.96.

Table 4*Central Indicators and Dispersion Measures Related to Work-related English Knowledge*

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis	Minimum	Maximum
Work-related English Knowledge	17.7333	2.30357	.853	1.831	12.00	25.00
Communicating with staff in English cannot improve work-related English knowledge	1.842	1.250				
Higher levels of work-related English knowledge lead to productivity of employees	4.267	0.905				
Work-related English knowledge facilitates recognition and exploitation of business opportunities	4.275	0.788				
There is a relation between employers and employees in terms of work-related knowledge of English	3.025	1.088				
The important role of the English language in the market	4.325	0.945				

Table 4 displays that the Indices of mean (M) and standard deviation

(SD) related to work-related English knowledge are 17.73 and 2.30, respectively. The subskill values obtained for communicating with the staff in English were $M= 1.82$ and $SD= 1.25$. In addition, work-related English knowledge was shown to result in higher productivity of the employees with $M=4.26$ and $SD=0.90$. Facilitation of the recognition and exploitation of business opportunities as a result of improved work-related English knowledge produced $M= 4.27$ and $SD= 0.78$. In addition, M and SD for the relation between employers and employees in terms of work-related knowledge of English are 3.02 and 1.08, respectively. Lastly, the values of M and SD for the role of the English language in the market are 4.32 and 0.94, respectively.

Table 5

Central Indicators and Dispersion Measures Related to English Language in the Market

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis	Minimum	Maximum
English Language in the Market	31.1333	3.68265	-.043	.002	21.00	40.00
Most managers are not familiar with English	3.717	1.109				
Lack of proficiency in English results in missed contracts	3.842	1.012				
English proficiency is essential for Iranian organizations	2.817	1.283				
Emphasizing English proficiency when recruiting staff	2.817	1.316				
English language leads to international competition	4.592	0.692				
Market-related English is necessary	3.958	1.148				
English knowledge helps with negotiation skills	4.700	0.574				
Strong tendency toward English	4.692	0.577				

Table 5 shows that the values of mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) for the English language in the market are 31.13 and 3.68, respectively. The first subskill is the managers' lack of familiarity with the English language with M= 3.71 and SD= 1.10. The obtained values of M and SD for the lack of proficiency in English are 3.84 and 1.01. The value of M for emphasis on English proficiency when recruiting staff is 2.81 and its SD was calculated as 1.31. Moreover, the index of M with respect to the role of the English language in international competition is 4.59 and its attributed SD is 0.69. The values of M and SD for the role of English knowledge in negotiations are 4.70 and 0.57, respectively. Finally, the obtained M for strong tendency toward English is 4.69 and its attributed SD is 0.57

Table 6

Central Indicators and Dispersion Measures Related to the English Language Competence Outsourcing

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis	Minimum	Maximum
English Language Competence	18.5053	3.05901	-0.437	2.711	5.00	25.00
Outsourcing						
The company does not outsource documents to be translated into Persian	3.325	1.078				
Need for bilingual translators and interpreters	3.200	1.206				
Most operations are not conducted in English	3.723	1.004				
Most managers are not proficient in English	3.916	1.042				
Managers need assistance in English communications	4.342	0.704				

As can be seen in Table 6 above, the values of mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) for English language competence outsourcing are 18.50 and 3.05, respectively. The subskill where the PSEEZ companies do not rely on outsourcing documents to be translated into Persian produced M= 3.32 and SD (1.07). The value of M for requiring bilingual translators equals 3.20 and its attributed SD is 1.20. In addition, the indices of M and SD for operations that are not conducted in English are 3.2 and 1.00, respectively. The next subskill is lack of English proficiency among managers with M=3.91 and SD equaling 1.04. Finally, the value of M for assistance in English communications is 4.32 and its attributed SD equals 0.70.

Table 7

Central Indicators and Dispersion Measures Related to Digitalization

Items	Std.		Skewness	Kurtosis	Minimum	Maximum
	Mean	Deviation				
Digitalization	17.6250	2.90772	.355	.442	9.00	25.00
Protocols and orders are digitalized	3.592	0.957				
Direct relationship between staff's proficiency in English and technology awareness	4.042	0.974				
Most courses use digital instruments	3.583	0.875				
Staff do not use digital instruments to improve their English knowledge	3.175	0.993				
Digital facilities are not accessible for the staff in PSEEZ	3.233	1.158				

As shown in Table 7, the indices of mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) for digitalization are 17.62 and 2.90, respectively. The component of digitalized protocols and orders was calculated with M=3.59 and SD=0.95. The other component is direct relationship between the staff's proficiency in English and technology awareness (M= 4.04 and SD=0.97). The values of M and SD defined for utilizing digitalized instruments are 3.58 and 0.78, respectively. Next, the value of M for lack of attention to the role of digital instruments in improving English knowledge is 3.17 and its SD equals 0.99. Finally, the index of M regarding unavailability of digital facilities for the staff in PSEEZ is 3.23 and the SD is measured as 1.15.

Investigating the Second Research Question

The second research question investigated if there were any relationship between different sub-scales of the questionnaire and demographic information of the participants. Table 8 presents the results of the correlation.

Table 8

Results of the Correlation Test on the Components of the Questionnaire

	English language knowledge	Work related English knowledge	English language in the market	English language competence outsourcing	Digitalization	Mangers' proficiency
Gender	-.158	-.125	.006	.022	-.156	-.118
Age	.028	-.050	-.150	-.063	-.087	-.098
English skill	-.015	-.065	.209*	-.036	.060	.061
Language	-.054	-.039	.016	-.034	.086	-.007
Education	-.105	.029	-.001	-.029	-.159	-.084
Learning method	.057	.169	-.161	.076	-.085	.000

Abroad trip	.146	-.089	.082	-.062	.007	.044
Work experience	-.020	-.082	-.202*	-.105	-.234*	-.200*
English language knowledge	1	.284**	.359**	.161	.211*	.652**
Work related English knowledge	.284**	1	.321**	.273**	.238**	.592**
English language in the market	.359**	.321**	1	.273**	.245**	.712**
English language competence outsourcing	.161	.273**	.273**	1	.473**	.653**
Digitalization	.211*	.238**	.245**	.473**	1	.644**
Managers' proficiency	.652**	.592**	.712**	.653**	.644**	1

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The results of the Pearson correlation coefficient test showed that there is a positive and significant relationship between the age variable and English Language in the Market (sig <0.05). There is also a negative and significant relationship between work experience and the variables of English language in the market and digitalization. In addition, the study of the relationship among the components of the research shows that there is a positive and significant relationship among the components (sig <0.05). In other words, by improving one component, other components level up proportionately. In sum, the correlation coefficient is significant at (sig <0.05) between the managers' proficiency in English with the variables of English language knowledge (0.652), work-related English knowledge (0.592), English language in the market (0.712), English language competence outsourcing (0.653), and digitalization (0.644). As can be seen, all the research components are almost equally important in increasing proficiency in English among the PSEEZ executive managers and decision-makers, with English Language in the Market as the most significant component.

Discussion

PSEEZ is a particular economic zone established in 1998 for the utilization of South Pars oil and gas resources. It encourages commercial activities in the field of oil, gas, and petrochemical industries. Based on the

research findings, English language knowledge is essential for managers and decision-makers in their endeavors to tap into the international market opportunities. The findings revealed that the best way for the managers and decision-makers to improve their English or any other international language for that matter, was by attending language classes. The results also indicated that higher knowledge of work-related English can lead to productivity of the staff. Moreover, there may be advantages or opportunities missed or lost altogether in international contracts for want of proficiency in English. The findings showed that English language can also be helpful in case of competing with international organizations through timely recognition and exploitation of business opportunities. In the same vein, holding market-related language courses can help managers in their efforts to recognize and exploit international opportunities as language proficient managers and decision-makers can negotiate better with their international counterparts. The findings also showed that the majority of the work procedures in PSEEZ were not done in English because generally not all the employees there are proficient enough. It should be interestingly noted, however, that they are advised to have bilingual dictionaries available for occasions where the need may arise for them to consult their dictionaries.

In addition, all the operations in PSEEZ are digitalized for employees and their pre-service and in-service courses took advantage of digital instruments; however, they generally do not utilize these digital instruments in boosting their English language skills for various reasons. It should be also mentioned that the digital language leaning facilities are not available all the time in the company.

This study is novel in that it stems from two currents of literature, i.e., entrepreneurship and English language learning and teaching. As far as the authors know, no similar research has been done in Iran, and it is a fairly new interdisciplinary topic in the world. Findings of the present study agree with Vinnikainen's (2022) work which showed the importance of foreign language proficiency for the success of the professionals' career. Moreover, this study is line with the study of Welch et al. (2001) who maintain that the English

language is an essential element in the internalization of a company. Similarly, Stoian, et al. (2011) found that having English or foreign language skills affect the antecedents of business performance and it is projected in all the multinational operations of companies. Parallel to this study, Sheng and Mullen (2011) stated that English language proficiency can facilitate marketing closeness. In addition, Liesch et al. (2002) pointed that language competency can play a significant role in finding and selecting the markets. Lastly, the present research results are consistent with Hurmerinta et al. (2015) who found that matching linguistic knowledge directs managers in their recognition of international opportunities.

While some researchers have continued to consider language as a barrier to internationalization, a number of studies have also shown that the decision-maker's language skills may increase the firm's likelihood of expanding its business internationally (Fernandez-Ortiz & Lombardo, 2009; Holzmuller & Kasper, 1990). Leonidou (2004) and Suarez-Ortega (2003) found that language differences were no longer a significant barrier to SME internationalization. Besides the globalization and the emergence of Business English as the new lingua franca (Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2012; Rogerson-Revell, 2007), this may be due to the increasing number of intermediaries performances as language and cultural interpreters among international companies all over the world-wide market (Fast, 2021; Jansson & Sandberg, 2008; Welch, et al., 2001).

Conclusion

The present study confirmed that Business English is a specialty in English language studies revolving around business, industry, finance, and international affairs. In today's world of global markets and digital communications, Business English is a concept that is becoming increasingly important as English has come to be known as the business language. In this line, learning work-related vocabulary and business jargons could prove very valuable. Moreover, the findings of the present study imply that businesses especially those that seek international recognition should invest on English

language proficiency of their decision-making managers. Development of English language centers which provide consistent language training can considerably affect the visibility of companies in the international markets. The study also implies that introduction of work-related English is important when designing the English program in these contexts.

The present research was the first attempt in Iran to examine the role of the English language in recognizing and exploiting international opportunities, the two pillars of entrepreneurship. However, more examinations drawing on concepts from a variety of disciplines and employing diverse methodologies are required in the future because this field is very fragmented, with serious knowledge gaps in theory, data, methodology, and content in Iran and all over the world. This study fulfilled this gap to some extent but much remains to be done. To motivate future research in this direction, this study suggests advancing the investigation of the role of language in recognizing and exploiting international opportunities on a larger scale and in other industry and business fields. We particularly encourage the integration of insights from different English and business disciplines as an opportunity to gain a deeper insight into language proficiency in international businesses.

Furthermore, future research can investigate the reasons why employees may not be inclined to learn or improve their English or do not feel motivated to use the learning instruments that have been provided for them. Future studies can also focus on other aspects, such as content and need analysis, attitudes of the top management toward learning English as a strategic investment, e-learning and digital considerations, particularly following the Covid-19 pandemic, attention to hiring of qualified teachers and instructors for the programs and workshops, and so on.

The present research also suffers from a number of limitations. To begin with, the research instrument used for data collection was a survey. A common downside of such surveys, whether in-person or online, is that respondents' answers may not always reflect what they in fact know to be true, but may rather reflect what might be commonly expected in a given situation. In

addition, since surveys require the individuals to select their responses based on their judgements, thoughts or beliefs, the self-reported data that is obtained may be disposed to under- or overestimation.

Another limitation concerns the interviews which were conducted as the first step to develop the research questionnaire. With the managers at PSEEZ, in-person interviews were out of questions mainly to observe the safety protocols for the COVID-19 pandemic and also because of their tight and unpredictable work schedules. Thus, they only agreed with the answers to typed-out interviews questions which were sent to them via email or WhatsApp. This precluded the opportunity for interactive interviews which may have led to gleaning more details.

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Appendix I

Dear participant,

The purpose of this survey is to investigate the *role of English language competency in international opportunity recognition and exploitation in Pars Special Economic Energy Zone (PSEEZ)*. I would greatly appreciate it if you could take some of your precious time out of your busy schedule to complete the following questionnaire. I should stress that all of your information and answers will be kept strictly confidential. Your answers would certainly enhance the richness and content validity of the study and obviate its problems. I also welcome any comments that you may have about this research, hence, I have included a comment section at the end of this questionnaire. If you have any questions, please contact the researcher at the following address:

h.ekbatani@alumni.ut.ac.ir

We will be glad to share the results of the study if you write to us at the above address. Thank you again for your assistance in this project. Sincerely,

Gender: Male Female

Age: 24-29 30-36 37-43 44 and more

Occupation: Please specify _____

Job experience (in years) _____

Mother language: Please specify _____

Academic degree: BSc MSc PhD

Academic major: Please specify _____

How did you learn English?

Institutes University In the company Self-study None

How do you evaluate your level of proficiency in English?

Beginner Intermediate Advanced

How many marketing trips have you ever had? 1 2 3 More than 3

Please choose an answer according to the following criteria:

1- strongly disagree 2- disagree 3- no idea 4- agree 5- strongly agree

No.	Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	No idea	Agree	Strongly agree
A.	English Language Knowledge					
1	For marketing purposes, the staff mostly need the English language knowledge in both written and oral modes.					
2	English language knowledge has a significant role in your work context.					
3	The purpose and nature of English language knowledge for marketing is significantly different from English for general purposes.					
4	Both subject matter knowledge and English language knowledge are important criteria for measuring employees'/employers' English language knowledge.					
5	Most in-service courses for the staff are based on English language instruction.					
6	It is better for the staff to learn English along with other languages.					

No.	Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	No idea	Agree	Strongly agree
B.	Work-related Knowledge					
7	Communicating with the English staff does not improve your work-related knowledge.					
8	Higher levels of work-related knowledge regarding PSEEZ affect the productivity of the employees.					
9	Work-related knowledge in PSEEZ might lead to various business opportunities.					
10	There is a balance between the employees' and employers' work-related knowledge in PSEEZ.					
11	The importance of the work-related knowledge in the market is often taken for granted.					
C.	English Language in the Market					
12	Most managers and employees are not familiar with the English language.					
13	Organizations may lose the contracts or its benefit(s) due to lack of English proficiency.					

No.	Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	No idea	Agree	Strongly agree
14	English proficiency is one of the essential requirements in Iranian organization procedures.					
15	Your organization emphasizes the importance of English language when recruiting an employee.					
16	English language may help competing in foreign markets.					
17	Market-related English language courses are necessary in your business.					
18	English language knowledge can help during negotiations with foreign companies.					
19	There is a strong tendency toward English language compared to other languages.					
D.	English Language Competence Outsourcing					
20	The company does not outsource the documents to be translated into native Persian.					
21	The staff need to have bilingual translators and interpreters for doing trade and business.					

No.	Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	No idea	Agree	Strongly agree
22	Most company activities are not operated in English.					
23	Majority of the staff do not have any English language skill.					
24	For business and market, the staff need assistance for communicating in English.					
E.	Digitalization					
25	Most company protocols and orders are digitalized.					
26	There is a direct relationship between the staff English language competence and their technology awareness.					
27	Most pre-service and in-services English language courses utilize digital instruments.					
28	The staff do not use digital facilities to improve their English language skills.					
29	Digital facilities are not accessible for both the employers and employees in the PSEEZ.					

Comments

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Thank you for your helpful cooperation