



# Foreign Language Capability as a Strategic Resource for Strengthening MSME Marketing Competitiveness

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## Abstract

Micro, small, and medium enterprises play a central role in fostering inclusive economic growth, yet many continue to face constraints in accessing wider markets. In increasingly globalized and digitalized business environments, limited foreign language capability has emerged as an underexplored barrier that restricts MSME marketing effectiveness and competitiveness. This study aims to examine how foreign language competence, developed through a structured training and mentoring program, contributes to strengthening MSME marketing practices within a community empowerment context. Adopting a qualitative dominant mixed methods design, the study drew data from participating MSME owners across multiple sectors, including interviews, observations, questionnaires, and analysis of marketing materials produced before and after the intervention. The findings reveal that foreign language capability enhanced participants' confidence, improved the clarity and functionality of marketing communication, and fostered greater strategic awareness in presenting products to broader audiences. Rather than serving merely as a symbolic attribute, foreign language use functioned as an applied strategic resource that supported more professional branding and customer engagement. However, the results also indicate that capability development was gradual and shaped by contextual constraints such as limited time, digital literacy, and concerns over accuracy. The study contributes to literature by positioning language competence as an intangible form of human capital and strategic capability relevant to MSME competitiveness. Practically, the findings suggest that empowerment programs aligned with sustainable development objectives should integrate foreign language training with applied marketing practice and sustained mentoring to achieve meaningful and lasting outcomes.

**Keywords:** MSME Competitiveness, Foreign Language Capability, Marketing Communication, Community Empowerment, Sustainable Development

## Introduction

Micro, small, and medium enterprises play a decisive role in economic development, employment generation, and poverty alleviation across emerging and developed economies. According to the World Bank, MSMEs account for more than ninety percent of businesses worldwide and generate a substantial share of total employment, particularly in developing countries. Their economic significance makes MSMEs a central pillar in discussions surrounding inclusive growth and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth (United Nations, 2015). Despite their importance, MSMEs



continue to face persistent structural barriers that constrain their competitiveness, productivity, and capacity to engage in broader markets.

Prior research has extensively documented the challenges experienced by MSMEs, highlighting limited access to finance, technological constraints, informality, and regulatory complexity as key impediments to growth (Beck & Demirguc-Kunt, 2006; Ayyagari et al., 2011). More recently, literature has expanded to include nonfinancial factors influencing MSME competitiveness, such as managerial capabilities, innovation practices, and market orientation (Martin et al., 2019). However, while these studies have significantly advanced understanding of MSME constraints, far less attention has been paid to linguistic capability as a strategic resource shaping firms' access to markets and competitive positioning.

In the context of globalization and digital trade, marketing practices have undergone fundamental transformations that increasingly require firms to communicate beyond local linguistic boundaries. Online marketplaces, cross border e commerce platforms, international tourism flows, and global supply chains expose even micro enterprises to multilingual consumer environments. Language therefore becomes not merely a medium of communication, but a mechanism through which firms project credibility, signal quality, and build trust with diverse audiences (Harzing & Feely, 2008). International marketing studies have shown that linguistic mismatches between firms and consumers can generate misunderstandings, reduce perceived professionalism, and weaken brand evaluation (Hornikx et al., 2010).

The strategic importance of language has been examined largely within multinational corporations and export-oriented firms. Research in international business has demonstrated that language proficiency influences firms' internationalization processes, coordination efficiency, and relationship management with foreign partners (Piekkari et al., 2014; Neeley, 2017). Harzing and Pudelko (2013), for instance, argue that language competence shapes power dynamics, decision making, and knowledge flows within international firms. Similarly, studies on export behavior suggest that entrepreneurs' foreign language skills affect market selection, negotiation effectiveness, and export performance (Williams & Chaston, 2004; Hagen et al., 2012).

In contrast, the role of foreign language use in micro and small enterprises has received considerably less scholarly attention. Existing MSME research often treats language as a background variable or peripheral skill, rather than as a form of human capital embedded in daily business practices. When language is discussed, it is usually framed as an individual level competency rather than as an organizational resource with strategic implications for branding, marketing, and competitiveness (Angouri & Piekkari, 2018). This tendency has resulted in an incomplete understanding of how linguistic capability affects MSMEs' capacity to access new markets and participates in global economic activities.

From a theoretical perspective, this omission is notable. Human capital theory conceptualizes skills and knowledge as productive assets that enhance individual and organizational performance (Becker, 1993). Within this framework, foreign language competence represents a form of human capital that can generate economic returns by enabling access to information, networks, and markets. Similarly, the resource-based view of the firm emphasizes that sustainable competitive advantage arises from valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resources (Barney, 1991). Language capability, particularly when embedded in firm specific practices such as marketing communication and customer engagement, meets several of these criteria and thus warrants analytical attention.

The capability approach further strengthens this argument by emphasizing that development is not solely about income generation, but about expanding individuals' and organizations' capabilities to pursue valued goals (Sen, 1999). For MSMEs, linguistic capability expands the freedom to communicate with broader audiences, engage with international customers, and reimagine business identities beyond local markets. Language competence thus intersects directly with empowerment discourses and sustainable development, positioning it as a meaningful lever for inclusive economic growth.

Empirical studies at the intersection of language and marketing provide additional support for this perspective. Research in consumer behavior suggests that the use of widely understood international languages, particularly English, can enhance perceptions of product quality and

global orientation (Agarwal & Rao, 2019). Hornikx et al. (2013) demonstrate that foreign language product descriptions influence consumer attitudes when linguistic choices align with perceived country of origin and authenticity. However, these studies predominantly focus on consumer responses within controlled experimental settings, rather than on MSMEs' lived experiences and capacity building processes.

In developing countries' contexts, language barriers are often compounded by limited educational access and uneven exposure to international markets. MSME owners frequently rely on informal knowledge networks and experiential learning, which may not include foreign language training relevant to marketing and branding. This structural condition disproportionately affects micro enterprises operating in tourism related regions, craft industries, and food production sectors that interact with international visitors or online buyers (Löfgren, 2014). Despite these realities, there remains a scarcity of empirical research examining how targeted foreign language interventions influence MSME marketing practices and competitive outcomes.

Community based empowerment programs represent a promising yet underexplored site for such investigation. Universities and public institutions increasingly collaborate with MSMEs to deliver capacity building initiatives that integrate language training with practical business applications. These programs provide valuable opportunities to observe how foreign language skills are acquired, applied, and translated into marketing practices within real world MSME contexts. Nevertheless, much of the existing documentation of such initiatives remains descriptive and programmatic, focusing on implementation rather than analytical contribution.

This gap is particularly evident in the Indonesian context. As one of Southeast Asia's largest economies with a high concentration of MSMEs, Indonesia has prioritized MSME development as a national economic strategy. Government policies emphasize digitization, export readiness, and entrepreneurship training, yet language capability remains marginal within official MSME frameworks. Empirical studies on Indonesian MSMEs have largely centered on financial inclusion, digital adoption, and innovation, leaving language related dimensions insufficiently theorized and empirically examined (Tambunan, 2019; Pratono, 2018).

Against this backdrop, the present study addresses a critical research gap by examining the role of foreign language use in strengthening MSME competitiveness through marketing practices. Drawing on evidence from a structured community-based intervention involving MSMEs across diverse sectors, this study investigates how foreign language training and mentoring influence entrepreneurs' marketing capabilities, confidence, and market engagement strategies. Rather than treating language as an auxiliary skill, this study conceptualizes linguistic competence as an intangible strategic resource embedded in MSME marketing processes.

Specifically, this research aims to analyze how MSMEs adopt foreign language elements in product descriptions, branding narratives, and customer communication, and how these practices contribute to perceived competitiveness and market reach. By integrating insights from applied linguistics, international marketing, and development studies, the study seeks to advance interdisciplinary understanding of MSME empowerment in multilingual market environments.

The contribution of this study is threefold. First, it extends the MSME literature by foregrounding language capability as a strategic dimension of competitiveness, thereby enriching existing human capital and resource-based perspectives. Second, it contributes empirical evidence from an emerging economic context, addressing the geographical imbalance in current language and business research. Third, it offers policy and practice relevant insights for MSME empowerment programs aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 8, by demonstrating how language focused interventions can support inclusive and sustainable economic development. This study responds to calls for more integrative and context sensitive research on MSME development, moving beyond conventional financial and technological explanations toward a more holistic understanding of the capabilities that enable small firms to thrive in an increasingly interconnected global economy.

## Literature Review

The theoretical foundation of this study is situated at the intersection of human capital theory, the resource-based view of the firm, the capability approach, and international marketing

communication theory. Human capital theory conceptualizes skills, knowledge, and competencies as productive assets that enhance individual and organizational performance (Becker, 1993). Within this framework, foreign language competence represents a form of embodied human capital that facilitates information exchange, negotiation, and market participation. The resource-based view further strengthens this perspective by arguing that firms achieve sustainable competitive advantage through resources that are valuable, rare, and difficult to imitate (Barney, 1991). Language capability meets these criteria when embedded in firm specific marketing practices. From a development perspective, the capability approach emphasizes expanding actors' freedoms and functional abilities to pursue valued economic activities (Sen, 1999). Expert scholars suggest that key criteria within these theories include skill functionality, contextual relevance, and strategic embeddedness (Tece, 2007; Felin et al., 2012). Factors such as communicative competence, market-oriented language use, and symbolic meaning making constitute specific dimensions through which language operates as a strategic resource in MSME contexts (Harzing & Feely, 2008; Angouri & Piekari, 2018).

Building on these theoretical foundations, scholars have proposed various approaches, frameworks, and models to analyze language and competitiveness in business contexts. International business research has developed language sensitive frameworks addressing communication barriers, linguistic distance, and multilingual management (Piekari et al., 2014). Marketing studies have introduced models examining linguistic adaptation, brand language choice, and consumer perception across cultural markets (Hornikx et al., 2013; Luna et al., 2014). Entrepreneurship and MSME studies have focused on capability based and resource orchestration frameworks to explain small firm growth under resource constraints (Sirmon et al., 2011). These approaches identify dimensions such as language proficiency, communicative confidence, market orientation, and branding alignment as key indicators. The present study adapts these frameworks to a community based MSME development context, where language use is operationalized not as an abstract variable, but as an applied marketing practice shaped by training and mentoring interventions.

The analytical framework adopted in this study draws from the evolution of strategic capability theory and applied linguistics in organizational contexts. Early research treated language primarily as a technical skill supporting export activities (Williams & Chaston, 2004). Subsequent studies acknowledged its broader organizational role in shaping coordination, knowledge transfer, and institutional legitimacy (Piekari et al., 2014). More recent scholars have integrated resource-based theory with sociolinguistic perspectives to account for language as both a strategic and symbolic resource (Angouri & Marschan-Piekari, 2016). Previous researchers have deliberately combined these approaches to capture the multi-dimensional effects of language use, particularly in contexts where formal internationalization is limited but intercultural interaction is frequent. In developing economies, researchers have further adapted these models to informal and micro enterprise settings by emphasizing practice based and capability building orientations (Löfgren, 2014; Pratono, 2018).

From a systems perspective, the adopted framework allows the formal theoretical constructs of human capital, strategic resources, and capabilities to be applied to concrete material problems faced by MSMEs. The framework operates on the assumption that language capability is not an isolated input, but part of an interactive system connecting individual skills, organizational practices, and market environments (Tece, 2007). Through this lens, foreign language use enables MSMEs to restructure marketing narratives, align product presentation with target markets, and enhance perceived legitimacy among nonlocal consumers. The framework thus provides a coherent mechanism for linking abstract theory to observable changes in MSME marketing behavior and competitiveness.

The material object of this study consists of foreign language use within MSME marketing activities, including product descriptions, branding communication, and customer interaction. In many MSMEs, particularly micro enterprises, marketing practices are informal, owner driven, and shaped by immediate resource availability. Language use in this context often reflects limited training, reliance on translation tools, or symbolic adoption of foreign terms. By examining how structured language training and mentoring influence these practices, the study captures shifts in communicative accuracy, confidence, and strategic intent. This material object is therefore

examined as a dynamic construct evolving through intervention rather than as a static firm characteristic.

The subject of the study is the empowerment of MSMEs operating in a developing economy context, specifically within sectors exposed to broader market interaction such as food processing, crafts, and service-related industries. These enterprises typically begin with localized market orientations and minimal engagement with foreign language communication. Through participation in capacity building programs, MSME owners are introduced to market-oriented language use, branding principles, and customer focused communication strategies. The progression from limited linguistic awareness to applied marketing competence reflects a developmental trajectory shaped by institutional support, learning processes, and contextual constraints. This trajectory forms the empirical focus through which language capability and competitiveness are examined.

Previous research on MSMEs and language has predominantly focused on export-oriented firms, large organizations, or consumer perception experiments, with limited attention to micro enterprises in community empowerment settings (Hagen et al., 2012; Hornikx et al., 2013). Existing studies often isolate language proficiency without examining its integration into everyday marketing practices. The present study departs from this trend by focusing specifically on foreign language use as an applied marketing capability developed through structured intervention. The urgency of this research lies in its response to calls for more inclusive and context sensitive approaches to MSME development, particularly in relation to SDG 8. By addressing language capability as a strategic and empowering resource, the study contributes new empirical and theoretical insights to international discussions on MSME competitiveness and sustainable development.

## Methods

This study employed qualitative dominant mixed methods of research design with an emphasis on descriptive and analytical inquiry. The design was selected to capture both measurable changes in MSME marketing practices and the subjective experiences of enterprise owners participating in a foreign language-based marketing empowerment program. A community-based intervention approach was adopted, allowing the study to examine language capability development as an applied and context dependent process rather than as an abstract skill. This design is consistent with prior research on MSME capacity building, which highlights the importance of contextualized and practice-oriented analysis when examining human capital and strategic capabilities in small enterprises.

The primary data for this study were obtained directly from MSME owners who participated in a structured foreign language training and mentoring program. These participants represented diverse business sectors including food production, culinary services, crafts, fashion, and small-scale services. Secondary data were drawn from program documentation, training materials, reflective notes from facilitators, and sample marketing outputs produced by participants during and after the intervention. The use of multiple data sources enabled triangulation and strengthened the credibility of the findings.

Data collection was conducted over the duration of the empowerment program and immediately following its completion. Qualitative data were gathered through semi structured interviews, participant observations, and document analysis. Quantitative descriptive data were collected through pre and post program self-assessment questionnaires focusing on perceived language competence and marketing confidence. Interviews explored participants' experiences in applying foreign language elements to marketing activities, perceived challenges, and perceived changes in customer engagement. Observations focused on participant involvement during training sessions and mentoring activities, while document analysis examined changes in marketing materials such as product descriptions and promotional content.

Several instruments were utilized to support systematic data collection. A semi structured interview guide was developed to ensure consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences. The questionnaire instrument consisted of closed ended items using ordinal response scales to capture changes in perceived language ability, confidence, and marketing readiness. Observation checklists were used to document participant

engagement and application of language strategies during training activities. Document analysis protocols were employed to examine marketing texts produced before and after the intervention, focusing on clarity, relevance, and communicative intent.

Data collection followed a sequential procedure. Initial baseline data were gathered prior to the commencement of the training through questionnaires and preliminary interviews. During the program, observations and field notes were recorded to capture engagement and learning dynamics. After the completion of training and mentoring sessions, follow up questionnaires and interviews were conducted to identify perceived changes and reflections. Marketing materials produced by participants were collected at both stages to allow comparison over time. All interviews were conducted with informed consent and were audio recorded for accuracy before transcription.

Measurement in this study focused on both perceived and observable indicators of foreign language use in MSME marketing. Key dimensions included communicative confidence, functional language use, marketing clarity, and perceived market reach. Questionnaire items measured perceived improvement using scaled responses, while qualitative indicators were assessed through thematic interpretation of interview data and document analysis. Rather than relying solely on proficiency scores, measurement emphasized practical application and strategic alignment, reflecting the applied nature of language use in MSME marketing contexts.

Data analysis was conducted in several stages. Quantitative questionnaire data were analyzed descriptively to identify patterns of perceived change before and after the intervention. Qualitative data from interviews, observations, and documents were analyzed using thematic analysis. Transcripts and documents were coded inductively to identify recurring themes related to language capability, marketing practices, and competitiveness. Codes were then refined and clustered into higher level categories aligned with the study's theoretical framework. Triangulation across data sources was applied to enhance validity, and analytical memos were used to support reflexive interpretation. The integration of qualitative and quantitative findings allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how foreign language capability functioned as a strategic resource within MSME marketing practices.

## Findings

The findings are organized thematically to reflect how foreign language capability was developed and applied within MSME marketing practices during and after the intervention. The presentation combines descriptive quantitative indicators with qualitative evidence drawn from interviews, observations, and document analysis. The results are reported objectively and aligned with the study's analytical framework, which conceptualizes language competence as an applied strategic resource in MSME competitiveness (Figure1).

The questionnaire results indicate a noticeable improvement in participants perceived foreign language competence for marketing purposes. Prior to the intervention, most participants rated their ability to use a foreign language in marketing activities as low or very low, particularly in writing product descriptions and responding to customer inquiries. Following the program, a majority of respondents reported moderate to high confidence in using basic foreign language expressions relevant to their products and services. Approximately three quarters of participants indicated that they felt more confident presenting product information in a foreign language, especially English, on digital platforms and packaging materials.

Interview data reinforce these findings. One participant from the food processing sector noted that before the training, they avoided any use of English due to fear of making mistakes, but after the mentoring sessions they began to include simple but meaningful descriptions such as ingredients, product variants, and usage recommendations. Another participant from the craft sector stated that learning context specific vocabulary reduced anxiety and encouraged experimentation with bilingual promotional content. These narratives suggest that perceived competence was closely linked to confidence and willingness to engage with broader audiences, a relationship widely acknowledged in applied language and entrepreneurship research (Harzing & Feely, 2008; Angouri & Piekkari, 2018).

Document analysis of marketing outputs revealed substantive changes in how participants structured and framed their product communication. Prior to the intervention, foreign language

use was minimal and often limited to isolated words without clear communicative function. Post intervention materials demonstrated more systematic and purpose driven language use. Product descriptions increasingly incorporated information about product type, unique features, and usage context, rather than relying solely on brand names or decorative foreign terms.

For example, culinary MSMEs began to accompany product images with short English descriptions highlighting flavor, ingredients, and target consumers. Craft based enterprises adjusted their promotional texts to emphasize authenticity and production methods using accessible foreign language phrases. Observational data showed that participants actively revised their materials during mentoring sessions, seeking feedback on clarity and appropriateness. These observable changes align with prior findings that language use in marketing becomes effective when it is functionally embedded in meaning making rather than treated as a symbolic ornament (Hornikx et al., 2013).

A recurring theme across interviews was the perception that foreign language use contributed to a more professional business image. Participants reported that bilingual or foreign language enhanced materials increased their confidence when interacting with customers perceived as nonlocal, including tourists and online buyers from outside the region. Several participants reported receiving inquiries in response to newly posted content that used foreign language descriptions, though precise sales data were not systematically recorded.

One participant noted that the inclusion of English descriptions on social media led to messages from customers asking about shipping options and ingredients, interactions that did not occur previously. Another participant observed that customers expressed appreciation for clearer product information, particularly in markets where language diversity is common. These findings resonate with marketing research suggesting that language choice influences perceived credibility and openness to international markets (Luna et al., 2014; Agarwal & Rao, 2019).

Beyond technical improvements, participants demonstrated increased strategic awareness of language as a marketing resource. Interview data indicate that participants began to differentiate between decorative and communicative uses of foreign language. Rather than using foreign words solely to appear modern or global, participants articulated reasons for selecting specific expressions that aligned with their target customers. This shift was particularly evident among participants engaged in tourism related and culinary sectors, where customer interaction frequently involves individuals with diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Participants described learning to balance clarity, simplicity, and cultural appropriateness. For instance, some MSMEs chose to combine Indonesian and English descriptions to maintain local identity while expanding accessibility. This selective and contextual approach reflects the development of strategic capability, whereby resources are mobilized intentionally to support business goals (Teece, 2007). The emergence of this awareness suggests that the intervention influenced not only linguistic skills but also broader entrepreneurial decision-making processes.

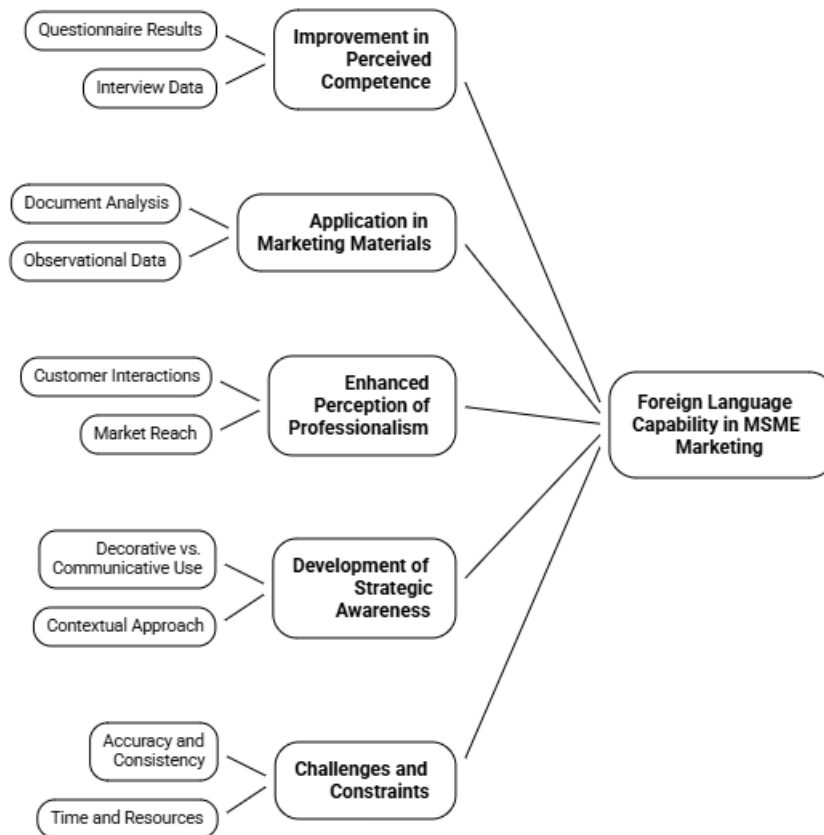
Despite positive developments, the findings also reveal ongoing challenges. Several participants expressed concerns about maintaining accuracy and consistency in foreign language use, particularly when expanding to longer promotional texts or responding spontaneously to customer inquiries. Limited time, reliance on informal translation tools, and fear of negative judgment remained barriers for some MSMEs. These constraints highlight the uneven nature of capability development and the need for continued support beyond initial training.

Observational data suggest that participants with prior exposure to digital marketing adapted foreign language use more quickly than those with limited online experience. This variation underscores the interaction between linguistic capability and other forms of capital such as digital literacy and marketing experience. Similar patterns have been reported in MSME studies that emphasize the cumulative nature of capability building under resource constraints (Sirmon et al., 2011; Pratono, 2018).

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that foreign language training and mentoring contributed to increased confidence, more functional marketing communication, and heightened strategic awareness among MSMEs. Language capability emerged not merely as an isolated skill, but as an applied resource shaping how enterprises present themselves, engage customers, and envision market expansion. At the same time, the persistence of structural constraints points to the importance of sustained and context sensitive interventions. These findings provide empirical

support for viewing language capability as an integral component of MSME competitiveness, particularly within inclusive and sustainable development agendas.

Figure 1: Language as a Strategic Marketing Resource for MSME Competitiveness



## Discussion

Several reports have shown that MSME competitiveness is shaped not only by access to finance and technology but also by intangible resources such as human capital and communicative capability (Barney, 1991; Teece, 2007). As mentioned in the literature review, language competence has been widely discussed in international business and marketing studies, particularly in relation to multinational firms and export-oriented enterprises (Harzing & Feely, 2008; Piekkari et al., 2014). Prior studies that have noted the importance of language highlight its role in facilitating knowledge transfer, relationship building, and market legitimacy (Neeley, 2017). Very little was found in the literature on the question of how foreign language use functions as a practical marketing capability for micro and small enterprises in community-based empowerment settings. Previous studies evaluating language skills in small firms observed inconsistent results on whether language competence directly translates into improved performance, largely due to differences in context and measurement (Hagen et al., 2012). A strong relationship between communicative capability and international market engagement has been reported in the literature, yet in reviewing the literature, no data was found on the association between structured language training and everyday MSME marketing practices in developing economy contexts.

The third question in this research was how MSMEs apply foreign language competence in their marketing practices following a capacity building intervention. An initial objective of the project was to identify whether foreign language training could move beyond symbolic usage and become functionally embedded in MSME marketing activities. The first question in this study sought to determine whether participants experienced changes in confidence and perceived competence in using a foreign language for business communication. It was hypothesised that participants with a history of limited exposure to foreign language use would demonstrate cautious but observable improvements after targeted mentoring. The present study was designed to determine the effect of foreign language-based marketing training on both perceived capability

and applied practice. With respect to the first research question, it was found that participants reported increased confidence and willingness to use foreign language expressions. This study set out with the aim of assessing the importance of foreign language capability in enhancing MSME marketing competitiveness.

This study found that foreign language competence developed through training and mentoring was associated with observable changes in marketing practices. Another finding is that participants shifted from minimal and fragmentary foreign language use to more functional and communicative application in product descriptions and promotional texts. The results of this study show that these changes were not limited to technical accuracy but extended to strategic awareness regarding audience and market orientation. The current investigation found that foreign language use was increasingly framed as a tool to clarify product value rather than merely to signal modernity. On the question of communicative capability, this study found that perceived confidence played a central role in enabling application. The first part of the questionnaire revealed that participants' self-assessed confidence increased substantially after the intervention, while this experiment did not detect any evidence for a complete elimination of language anxiety. The most obvious finding to emerge from the analysis is that practical relevance strongly influenced participants' engagement with foreign language use.

One interesting finding is the close alignment between perceived confidence and actual changes in marketing materials. Another important finding is that language use was selectively applied rather than uniformly expanded across all marketing channels. The most important result was that participants began to demonstrate intentional decision-making regarding language choice, combining local language and foreign language elements to balance accessibility and authenticity. Most striking was the substantial difference in how marketing texts were structured before and after the intervention, particularly in terms of informational clarity. Another finding that stands out from the results reported earlier is the emergence of strategic narratives linking language use to brand identity and customer trust.

What is surprising is that improvements were most pronounced in short and structured marketing texts rather than in extended customer interactions. Surprisingly, language complexity was found to remain limited even among participants who reported high confidence. One unanticipated result was that participants prioritized correctness and clarity over fluency and linguistic richness. What is curious about this result is that it contrasts with assumptions that increased exposure automatically leads to more elaborate language use. Surprisingly, no differences were found in perceived usefulness of foreign language use across business sectors, despite differences in customer profiles. This finding was unexpected and suggests that perceived market orientation may matter more than sector classification. One unexpected finding was the extent to which participants relied on collaborative feedback during mentoring sessions. Contrary to expectations, this study did not find a significant difference between participants with prior digital marketing experience and those without in terms of perceived benefit, although application speed differed.

This study confirms that language capability is associated with increased confidence and more purposeful marketing communication. This finding was also reported by Harzing and Feely (2008), who emphasized the role of language in enhancing perceived professionalism. This finding is consistent with that of Hornikx et al. (2013) who demonstrated that functional language use positively affects consumer evaluation. Comparison of the findings with those of other studies confirms that language competence operates most effectively when aligned with communicative goals. These results reflect those of Angouri and Piekari (2018) who also found that language functions as a strategic organizational resource. This finding broadly supports the work of other studies in this area linking human capital development with small firm competitiveness (Sirmon et al., 2011). In accordance with the present results, previous studies have demonstrated that applied capability building yields greater impact than isolated skill acquisition (Pratono, 2018).

This study has been unable to demonstrate that foreign language training alone leads directly to measurable performance outcomes such as sales growth. However, this result has not previously been described in relation to community based MSME programs. This outcome is contrary to that of Williams and Chaston (2004), who found direct links between language skills and export intensity in small firms. In contrast to earlier findings, however, no evidence of

immediate market expansion was detected. However, the findings of the current study do not support the assumption that technical proficiency is the primary driver of marketing effectiveness. These results differ from studies that treat language as a performance predictor, but they are broadly consistent with earlier work emphasizing capability development as a gradual process (Teece, 2007).

A possible explanation for this might be that participants were at an early stage of capability internalization. Another possible explanation for this is that language use in MSMEs is constrained by contextual factors such as time, digital literacy, and resource availability. Several factors could explain this observation. Firstly, participants prioritized risk reduction and accuracy. An alternative explanation for this result is that the intervention focused on foundational communicative functions rather than advanced fluency. This discrepancy could be attributed to the short duration of the program. These relationships may partly be explained by the interaction between confidence, perceived legitimacy, and customer engagement. It seems possible that these results are due to the applied nature of the training, which emphasized usability over completeness. Another source of uncertainty is the reliance on self-reported measures for perceived competence. A note of caution is due here since marketing outcomes were not tracked longitudinally. These findings may be somewhat limited by the absence of objective performance indicators. These data must be interpreted with caution because context specific factors may influence transferability. In observational studies, there is a potential for bias from participant enthusiasm. It is important to bear in mind the possible bias in these responses. However, with a relatively small and localized sample, caution must be applied, as the findings might not be generalizable to all MSME contexts.

These findings suggest that foreign language capability functions as an enabling rather than determining factors in MSME competitiveness. It is possible, therefore, that language use contributes indirectly by strengthening confidence and strategic awareness. The findings reported here suggest that language capability intersects with other forms of capital such as digital and social capabilities. According to these data, we can infer that incremental capability development is central to sustainable competitiveness. The present study raises the possibility that language-based interventions support broader empowerment processes. It is therefore likely that such connections exist between language use and entrepreneurial identity formation. These results provide further support for the hypothesis that communicative capability is a strategic resource.

These findings suggest that MSME empowerment programs should integrate language training with applied marketing practice. An implication of this finding is the possibility that language capability enhances inclusivity in market participation. One of the issues that emerges from these findings is the need for sustained mentoring rather than one time training. Some of the issues emerging from this finding relate specifically to curriculum design and contextual adaptation. The results of this observational study suggest that language focused interventions may help prevent marginalization in increasing multilingual markets.

This finding is reassuring since it demonstrates the relevance of applied linguistics to development practice. The present results are significant in at least two major respects. They advance theoretical understanding of language as a strategic capability and provide empirical evidence from a community based MSME setting. Unfortunately, these findings are rather difficult to interpret in purely economic terms because competitiveness is multi-dimensional. This is an important issue for future research. Research questions that could be asked include how language capability interacts with long term market performance. Several questions remain unanswered at present regarding sustainability of language use practices. Despite these promising results, questions remain about scalability. Additional research is needed to better understand longitudinal effects. A further study with more focus on comparative contexts is therefore suggested. Further studies, which take these variables into account, will need to be undertaken.

## **Conclusion**

This study sets out to examine how foreign language capability, developed through structured training and mentoring, contributes to the competitiveness of micro and small enterprises in their

marketing practices. The findings demonstrate that foreign language use, when approached as an applied and contextualized capability, supports meaningful changes in how MSMEs communicate product value, engage customers, and position themselves in broader markets. Rather than functioning merely as an ornamental or symbolic feature, foreign language competence emerged as an enabling resource that strengthened marketing clarity, confidence, and strategic awareness among participants.

The study highlights several key insights. First, improvements in perceived language competence were closely linked to increased confidence and willingness to experiment with foreign language elements in marketing materials. Second, participants were able to translate newly acquired language skills into concrete marketing outputs, particularly short product descriptions and promotional texts designed for digital platforms. Third, the intervention fostered a shift in mindset, with MSME owners becoming more intentional and strategic in their use of language, balancing accuracy, simplicity, and audience relevance. At the same time, the persistence of challenges such as concerns over correctness and sustainability of practice underscores that language-based capability development remains an incremental and context bound process.

The implications of these findings are both theoretical and practical. From a theoretical perspective, the study strengthens arguments within human capital theory, the resource-based view, and the capability approach by showing that language competence can operate as an intangible strategic resource in MSME contexts. It extends existing scholarships by providing empirical evidence from a community-based intervention in a developing economy, a setting that has received limited attention in language and business research. Practically, the findings suggest that MSME empowerment programs aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 8 should integrate foreign language training with applied marketing practice and sustained mentoring, rather than treating language as an isolated skill.

In conclusion, this study affirms that building foreign language capability is not simply about linguistic proficiency but about expanding the communicative and strategic space within which MSMEs operate. By enabling clearer self-representation and more confident market engagement, language-based interventions can contribute to inclusive and sustainable economic development. Future efforts to support MSME competitiveness will benefit from recognizing language as a form of capital that grows through practice, reflection, and continued support within real business environments.

### **Ethics approval**

Not required.

### **Competing interests**

All the authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

### **Underlying data**

Derived data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author on request.

### **How to cite**

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