

Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence in Business English Teaching in Chinese Universities: A Review of Challenges and Strategies

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Abstract: As global business communication becomes increasingly important, the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has become a central goal in Business English teaching in Chinese universities. However, many Chinese university students enter the workplace with limited ability to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries, despite years of formal English education. This paper reviews existing literature on the main challenges that prevent Chinese students from developing ICC in Business English contexts, and examines a range of teaching strategies that have been proposed to address these challenges. The challenges identified include: a limited awareness of cultural differences, the influence of Chinese communication styles on cross-cultural interaction, and the exam-oriented nature of the Chinese education system, which tends to reduce learning motivation and limit exposure to real-world business communication. In response to these challenges, this paper evaluates four key pedagogical strategies: the use of authentic materials and case studies, roleplay and simulation activities, intercultural comparison tasks, and project-based learning. The review finds that these strategies are most effective when they are used together and when they are designed to connect classroom learning to real communicative situations. This paper aims to offer practical guidance for Business English teachers in Chinese universities who wish to integrate ICC development more effectively into their teaching.

Keywords: Intercultural communicative competence; Business English; Chinese higher education; Cross-cultural communication; Teaching strategies; English for Specific Purposes

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1. Introduction

The ability to communicate effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds has become one of the most valued skills in international business. For Chinese university graduates who wish to work in international environments, this ability is no longer optional. It is a practical necessity. Yet despite the

growing emphasis on Business English in Chinese universities, many students complete their degree programs without developing the intercultural skills they will need in real professional settings ^[1].

This gap between what students learn in class and what they need in the workplace reflects a broader challenge in Business English teaching in China. Much of the existing curriculum focuses on language accuracy, vocabulary, and examination preparation. Cultural knowledge, when included, is often taught as a list of facts about Western customs rather than as a set of communicative skills that students can actively use ^[2]. As a result, students may know that eye contact is important in Western business meetings, but they do not know how to manage a real conversation where cultural expectations differ from their own.

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) refers to the ability to communicate successfully with people from different cultural backgrounds. It involves not only knowledge of cultural differences, but also the skills and attitudes needed to manage those differences in real interactions ^[3]. Developing ICC has been identified as a core objective of foreign language education by researchers worldwide, and its importance in Business English contexts has been widely acknowledged ^[4].

However, research specifically addressing how ICC should be developed in Business English classrooms in Chinese universities remains relatively limited. Most existing studies either focus on general English language teaching without attention to the business context or discuss ICC in abstract theoretical terms without offering practical strategies for classroom teachers. This review aims to fill this gap by bringing together research from the fields of Business English teaching, intercultural communication, and language pedagogy, and by evaluating specific strategies that have been shown to support ICC development in similar educational contexts.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 examines the main reasons why Chinese university students often struggle to develop ICC in Business English contexts. Section 3 reviews four teaching strategies that have been proposed to address these challenges. Section 4 offers conclusions and recommendations for teachers and future researchers.

2. Challenges in developing ICC among Chinese Business English learners

2.1. Limited awareness of cultural differences

One of the most basic obstacles to ICC development is that many Chinese university students have had little direct exposure to people from other cultures before entering university. Their understanding of Western business culture often comes from textbooks, films, or online content rather than from real interaction. This means that their cultural knowledge tends to be simplified or based on stereotypes, which can lead to misunderstandings when they encounter real cultural differences in communication ^[5].

Research has shown that surface-level cultural awareness, such as knowing that Americans tend to be more direct in communication or that business cards are treated differently in different cultures, is not sufficient for effective cross-cultural communication. What matters more is the ability to recognize and adapt to cultural differences as they arise in specific communicative situations. This deeper level of cultural awareness requires ongoing exposure to authentic cross-cultural interaction, which is difficult to provide in a traditional classroom setting.

Hofstede's ^[6] widely cited framework of cultural dimensions provides a useful theoretical lens for understanding some of the key differences between Chinese and Western business communication styles.

For example, China scores high on power distance and collectivism, while many Western countries score lower on these dimensions. These differences can have direct effects on communication behavior: Chinese professionals may be more inclined to defer to authority in meetings, avoid direct disagreement, or prioritize group harmony over individual expression, while their Western counterparts may expect more open debate and direct feedback. When Chinese students are unaware of these differences, they may misinterpret the behavior of their international colleagues or fail to communicate their own intentions clearly.

It is important to note that cultural frameworks such as Hofstede's should be used with caution. They describe general tendencies at the national level, but they do not account for the considerable individual variation that exists within any cultural group. Using cultural frameworks too rigidly can reinforce stereotypes rather than help students develop genuine intercultural sensitivity^[7]. Effective ICC teaching should therefore encourage students to treat cultural knowledge as a starting point for inquiry, not as a fixed set of rules.

2.2. The influence of Chinese communication styles

Chinese communication style is often described as high-context, meaning that much of the meaning in communication is conveyed indirectly through context, tone, and relationship rather than through explicit verbal statements^[8]. In contrast, many Western business cultures favor low-context communication, where meaning is expected to be expressed directly and clearly in words. This difference can create significant difficulties for Chinese students who are learning to communicate in Business English contexts.

For example, in Chinese business culture, it is common to express disagreement or refusal indirectly, using phrases that preserve the face of both parties rather than stating a negative position openly. A Chinese speaker might say something like "this may be difficult" when they actually mean "no." In a Western business context, this kind of indirect communication can easily be misread as agreement or ambiguity, leading to confusion and failed negotiations.

The concept of face (*mianzi*) also plays an important role in shaping Chinese business communication. As discussed in research on Chinese communication behavior, the need to maintain one's own face and to protect the face of others tends to discourage open disagreement, direct criticism, and public admission of mistakes^[9]. In a business English classroom, this cultural tendency can make students reluctant to participate in debate activities, give critical feedback to their peers, or engage in roleplays that require them to express strong opinions. Teachers who are unaware of this dynamic may misinterpret student silence as a lack of knowledge or engagement.

These communication style differences do not mean that Chinese students cannot learn to communicate effectively in international business settings. They do mean, however, that effective Business English teaching needs to explicitly address these differences and give students structured opportunities to practice communication styles that may feel unfamiliar or uncomfortable. Simply exposing students to Western business language without helping them understand and navigate the underlying cultural differences is unlikely to produce genuine ICC development.

2.3. The impact of exam-oriented education on learning motivation and real-world readiness

A third challenge in developing ICC among Chinese Business English learners is the broader educational

context in which they have grown up. Chinese students from primary school through high school have typically been educated within a system that strongly emphasizes examination performance. Academic success is measured primarily through standardized tests, and learning activities that do not directly contribute to test scores tend to receive less attention from both students and teachers ^[10].

The effects of this educational background are visible in university classrooms. Many students approach Business English courses with the expectation that learning consists of memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules that will be tested in examinations. Communicative activities, cultural discussions, and open-ended projects may seem less relevant to them, particularly if they do not see a clear connection between these activities and their academic or career goals. This limited intrinsic motivation is a significant obstacle to ICC development, because developing genuine intercultural skills requires active engagement, curiosity about other cultures, and a willingness to take communicative risks ^[11].

At the same time, it is important to recognize that many Chinese students do have genuine career aspirations that involve international communication. The challenge is often not a complete absence of motivation, but rather that students have not yet made the connection between the abstract content of their Business English courses and the real situations they will face after graduation. This suggests that one of the most important tasks for Business English teachers is to make the relevance of ICC development visible and concrete by designing learning activities that simulate real business situations and help students see how intercultural skills will matter in their future working lives.

3. Teaching strategies for ICC development in Business English classrooms

3.1. Using authentic materials and case studies

One of the most widely recommended strategies for developing ICC in Business English classrooms is the use of authentic materials: real documents, videos, and texts produced for genuine communicative purposes rather than specifically for language teaching. Authentic materials expose students to the actual language and communication styles used in international business contexts, and they provide a basis for discussion of real cultural differences and communication challenges ^[12].

Case studies are a particularly valuable form of authentic material for Business English teaching. A well-designed case study presents students with a real or realistic business situation that involves a cross-cultural communication challenge, and asks them to analyze the situation, identify the cultural factors at play, and propose a response. This kind of activity develops several important components of ICC simultaneously: cultural knowledge, analytical skills, and the ability to apply cultural understanding to specific communicative situations ^[13].

Research supports the effectiveness of case-based learning in business education more broadly. Lundeberg *et al.* ^[14] found that case-based instruction helped students develop more sophisticated analytical skills and a greater ability to apply knowledge to novel situations compared to traditional lecture-based teaching. In the context of Business English, these benefits are particularly relevant because intercultural communication is inherently situational: the appropriate response to a cross-cultural challenge depends on the specific context, the relationship between the parties, and the communicative goals involved.

In practice, teachers can use case studies drawn from real business events, from published business communication textbooks, or from their own experience. Cases that involve Chinese companies working with

international partners are especially useful because they help students see ICC challenges from a perspective they can identify with. It is also valuable to present cases where cross-cultural miscommunication led to problems, as these can help students develop a more realistic understanding of the practical consequences of intercultural misunderstanding. After working through a case, students should be encouraged to reflect not only on what went wrong but also what communicative strategies could have prevented the problem.

3.2. Roleplay and business simulation activities

Roleplay and business simulation are among the most commonly used communicative activities in Business English teaching, and they have a strong evidence base for developing both language skills and intercultural awareness. By placing students in simulated business scenarios, roleplay activities give them the opportunity to practice cross-cultural communication in a low-stakes environment where mistakes can be discussed and learned from rather than causing real professional consequences^[15].

For ICC development specifically, roleplay activities are most effective when they are designed to highlight cultural differences in communication style. For example, a negotiation roleplay in which one student plays a Chinese business representative, and another plays a Western counterpart, can help both students become more aware of how different communication styles, expectations about directness, and attitudes toward conflict affect the outcome of a business interaction. Debriefing discussions after the roleplay, in which the teacher guides students to reflect on what happened and why, are an essential part of making these activities educationally valuable^[16].

Business simulations, which are more extended versions of roleplay that unfold over multiple class sessions, can provide an even richer environment for ICC development. In a business simulation, students might take on roles within a fictional international company, work together on a project, and manage a range of communicative situations including meetings, presentations, email exchanges, and negotiations. This kind of extended simulation helps students develop the ability to sustain cross-cultural communication over time, which is closer to the reality of international business work than a single roleplay activity^[17].

One challenge of using roleplay and simulation in Chinese university classrooms is that students may initially feel uncomfortable with the level of spontaneous interaction these activities require. As discussed in Section 2, Chinese students may be reluctant to take communicative risks, express strong opinions, or engage in open debate. Teachers can help students overcome this reluctance by starting with more structured roleplay activities that provide clear scripts and guidelines, and gradually moving toward more open-ended simulations as students become more confident^[18].

3.3. Intercultural comparison tasks

Intercultural comparison tasks ask students to identify, analyze, and reflect on specific differences between Chinese and other business cultures. These tasks can take many forms, including comparative analysis of business documents from different countries, reflection activities in which students discuss their own cultural assumptions and how these might affect their communication with people from other backgrounds, or research projects in which students investigate the business communication practices of a specific country or region^[19].

The value of intercultural comparison tasks lies in the fact that they make cultural differences visible and discussable. Many students enter university with cultural assumptions that they have never examined

consciously. By creating structured opportunities for students to compare their own communicative practices with those of other cultures, teachers can help students develop what Byram calls critical cultural awareness: the ability to evaluate their own and others' cultural practices from an informed perspective, rather than simply assuming that their own way of doing things is the natural or correct way.

Kramsch^[20] introduced the concept of the third place in intercultural language learning, referring to a position of perspective from which learners can observe both their own culture and the target culture without fully identifying with either. Developing this kind of reflective distance is an important goal of ICC education because it helps learners move beyond simple cultural comparisons toward a more nuanced understanding of how culture shapes communication. Intercultural comparison tasks, when well designed, can help students develop this reflective capacity over time.

In practice, intercultural comparison tasks can be integrated into regular Business English lessons without requiring a great deal of additional class time. For example, when teaching business email writing, a teacher might ask students to compare a formal business email written in English with a similar email written in Chinese, and to discuss how the differences in tone, structure, and level of directness reflect different cultural expectations. This kind of brief comparative activity helps students develop cultural awareness while also developing their language skills, making it an efficient use of limited class time.

3.4. Project-based learning

Project-based learning (PBL) is a teaching approach in which students work on extended, real-world projects that require them to apply their knowledge and skills to solve genuine problems or create meaningful products. In Business English education, PBL can be a powerful tool for ICC development because it gives students the opportunity to engage with authentic cross-cultural communication challenges over an extended period of time, rather than in isolated classroom activities^[21].

A typical Business English PBL project might ask groups of students to develop a proposal for entering a new international market, prepare a presentation for a foreign client, or conduct research on the business culture of a specific country and present their findings to the class. These kinds of projects require students to use their Business English skills for genuine communicative purposes, to develop their cultural knowledge in response to real questions, and to collaborate with their peers in ways that reflect actual workplace dynamics^[22].

Research on PBL in language education has generally found positive effects on student motivation, language development, and the ability to apply learning to real-world situations. Stoller^[23] reviewed a range of studies on content-based and project-based approaches in English language teaching and found that these approaches were particularly effective at developing learner autonomy and intrinsic motivation, both of which are important for ICC development. When students are working on projects that they find genuinely interesting and relevant to their future careers, they are more likely to invest the effort needed to develop real communicative competence.

However, PBL also presents some challenges in the Chinese university context. Projects require students to take initiative, manage their own learning, and work collaboratively without close teacher direction, all of which may feel unfamiliar to students who have been educated in a more teacher-centered system. Teachers who wish to use PBL effectively need to provide adequate scaffolding at the beginning of the project, including clear guidelines, regular check-ins, and structured opportunities for reflection, before gradually releasing more responsibility to students as they develop greater confidence and independence^[24].

4. Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the main challenges that Chinese university students face in developing ICC in Business English contexts, and has evaluated four key teaching strategies for addressing these challenges. The challenges identified, including limited cultural awareness, the influence of Chinese high-context communication styles, and the effects of exam-oriented schooling on motivation and real-world readiness, are deeply rooted in both cultural and educational contexts. They cannot be resolved by any single teaching intervention.

The four strategies reviewed in this paper, namely the use of authentic materials and case studies, roleplay and business simulation, intercultural comparison tasks, and project-based learning, each offer genuine contributions to ICC development. Authentic materials and case studies connect classroom learning to real business situations and give students a basis for analyzing cultural differences. Roleplay and simulation provide structured opportunities to practice cross-cultural communication in a safe environment. Intercultural comparison tasks help students develop the reflective cultural awareness that is at the heart of genuine ICC. Project-based learning offers the most extended and authentic context for ICC development, but also requires the most careful scaffolding to be effective in the Chinese university classroom.

A key finding of this review is that these strategies work best when they are used together rather than in isolation. A single roleplay activity will not develop ICC on its own, but a curriculum that regularly integrates case studies, comparison tasks, simulation activities, and project work can create a rich and sustained environment for intercultural learning. Teachers should also be aware that the development of ICC is a gradual process that requires ongoing practice and reflection, not a skill that can be acquired in a single course or semester.

This review also highlights a gap in the existing literature. While there is a reasonable body of research on ICC in general foreign language education, and a growing body of research on Business English teaching in China, there are relatively few studies that specifically examine ICC development in Business English classrooms at Chinese universities, and even fewer that evaluate the effectiveness of specific teaching strategies in this context with empirical data. Future research should address this gap by conducting classroom-based studies that track the effects of ICC-focused teaching interventions over time, and by developing assessment tools that can measure ICC development in meaningful and practical ways.

For Business English teachers in Chinese universities, the practical implication of this review is straightforward: developing students' intercultural communicative competence requires more than teaching them Business English vocabulary and grammar. It requires creating learning experiences that connect language use to cultural understanding, that expose students to the realities of cross-cultural business communication, and that give them the skills and confidence to manage cultural differences in their future professional lives. This is a demanding goal, but it is also one of the most important contributions that Business English education can make to preparing Chinese graduates for an increasingly interconnected world.

Disclosure statement

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