

## DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN BUSINESS ENGLISH CLASSES

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses the concept of intercultural competence and explores possibilities to integrate it into the business English class at university. The first part of the paper defines the concept and provides the historical background for its development, while also introducing some prominent models of intercultural competence. The second part offers insights into effective ways for enhancing intercultural competence in the business English class by raising cultural awareness, developing knowledge, skills and attitudes, using standard teaching practices, collaborative learning and immersive technologies, and engaging all categories of students. The conclusions mark the final part of the paper.

**Key words:** intercultural competence, business English class, cultural awareness, knowledge, skills, attitudes.

### 1. Introduction

Culture is defined as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 6). From this perspective, it encompasses behavioural models, ideas, beliefs, values and attitudes acquired throughout the individuals’ lifetime, and reveals patterns of thinking, feeling, and reacting which are likely to reoccur based on individuals’ past (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 4-6). But culture also includes material possessions, arts and crafts, food and cuisine, language, rituals and ceremonies, symbols and emblems, or dress. That is why oftentimes the iceberg metaphor is used for presenting it, with just a small part of it being visible and the invisible part, below the surface, being difficult and very difficult to grasp and causing misunderstandings in communication involving people with different cultural backgrounds (Hall 1976, pp. 9-12; 57-61; Frendo 2005, p. 11).

In intercultural communication, the processes of encoding, from the part of the sender, and that of decoding, from the part of the receiver, are of particular relevance. In order for communication to be effective, the code by means of which the message is conveyed should be shared by interlocutors. Nevertheless, using the same language is not always enough, as the same meaning should be given to the language used in communication

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(Hall, 1980). Therefore, effective communication in intercultural contexts requires intercultural competence on the part of all those involved in the act of communication.

Intercultural competence bears particular importance in international business communication, being a prerequisite for rapport established with people coming from different societies, coping with cultural differences, and, eventually, for entrepreneurial success and good career prospects in the international labour market (Mebitil, 2023; Pinna Pintor and Premazzi, 2024). With all this, until very recently, intercultural competence has been overlooked in the school curricula of many countries, being a competence considered at the crossroads of several disciplines and being approached only indirectly. The present paper aims to present the characteristics of intercultural competence, some prominent models devised over time, and ways in which this competence can be integrated into and developed during the business English classes.

## **2. Intercultural Competence: Definition and Models**

Intercultural competence has been defined as “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Deardorff, 2006). It is a competence which started to be discussed in the field of foreign language teaching and learning as early as the 1970s, when the communicative approach to language teaching gained significant ground. Linguists then showed that, in order to communicate effectively in real-life contexts with people from other cultures, one must also be able to communicate in ways that are socially and culturally appropriate (Byram et al., 2002).

Starting also in the 1970s and throughout the following decades, the Council of Europe and then the European Commission drew more and more attention to the need to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers and promote mutual understanding between all cultures. Cultural dialogue is mentioned as a key element in establishing truly democratic societies and a cohesive society in Europe, being among the three strategic objectives of the European Agenda for Culture in 2008, declared as “The European Year of Intercultural Dialogue” (European Commission, 2007; European Commission, 2008).

Many EU documents have advocated for the need to foster youth opportunities for acquiring intercultural competence from an early age, through all forms of education, active participation in society, and international mobility. The importance of promoting culture, arts, music, and sport in enhancing students’ cultural awareness and fostering respect for and appreciation of other cultures is fully acknowledged in these documents, just like the role of foreign language education in enhancing intercultural competence. They also highlight that the development of students’ sense of identity in response to the experience of otherness in language and culture should be a central objective of foreign language classes, so that students become able to integrate the intercultural dimension in both their personal and professional development (Council of Europe, 2003; European Commission, 2004; European Commission, 2007; European Commission, 2008; Council of the European Union, 2008; Le Pichon-Vorstman et al., 2020).

All the aforementioned documents make reference to intercultural competence, but they do not provide a definition for it or elaborate on it. The formal and systematic

conceptualisation of intercultural communication took place around the turn of the millennium with the publication of several comprehensive models and theories for intercultural competence (Spitzberg and Chagnon, 2009). Two of the most widely used models at present are those belonging to M. Byram and D.K. Deardorff.

In his "Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence", Byram, starts from linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, and discourse competence and emphasises that they represent preconditions for the development of intercultural communicative competence. Without the foundation given by the convergence to linguistic norms, the awareness of the specific meanings attached to words, with their values and connotations, in specific contexts, intercultural communication would not be possible (Byram, 1997, pp. 20-23, 71-73). Drawing upon these competences, Byram elaborates a model of intercultural communicative competence that can be taught and learnt in schools and other educational institutions during foreign language classes. The model comprises five major components, labelled as *savoirs*, which contribute to the development of one's ability to understand people from other cultures and to relate to them in as complex situations as possible (Byram 1997, pp. 5-6).

Knowledge (*savoir*) involves, first, declarative knowledge about social groups in one's own culture and in the interlocutor's culture, about their cultural products, and the interaction practices at individual and societal levels. Another category of knowledge is that of knowledge of the processes involved in interactions (Byram 1997, pp. 35-37).

The second component of intercultural communicative competence is represented by skills, which refer to the individual's capacity to process cultural input and perform cultural mediation. Distinction is made between skills of interpreting/ relating (*savoir comprendre*) and skills of discovery/ interaction (*savoir apprendre/ faire*). The former refer to the individual's ability to analyse input information from different cultures and establish potential relationships between them, while the latter involve the individual's ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and its practices. Skills of discovery can function independently or in conjunction with skills of interpreting and are developed on the basis of partial existing knowledge or framework regarding the interlocutor's culture (Byram 1997, pp. 61-63).

Attitudes (*savoir être*) are considered a prerequisite for intercultural communication, but they are also a result of it, as they are submitted to change following the interaction with intercultural speakers. For successful communication, interlocutors should rely on openness and curiosity and avoid prejudices and stereotypes, as well as preset positive beliefs, as they can all trigger misunderstandings and breakdowns in communication (Byram 1997, pp. 32-34, 57-58).

Critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*) refers to one's ability to evaluate perspectives, practices and products belonging to different countries from a critical standpoint and considering explicit criteria. It integrates skills, knowledge, and attitudes of the other components of intercultural communicative competence into an evaluative framework (Byram 1997, pp. 53, 63-64, 101).

Another important contribution in the field of intercultural competence development is that of Deardorff. Unlike Byram, she considers intercultural competence in the context of internationalisation, where it represents a paramount outcome, but her contribution is

essential for the development of intercultural competence as part of foreign language education, as well. Deardoff adheres to Byram's model, but she takes one step forward and reframes his model by integrating the components of intercultural competence first into a Pyramidal Model, and then into a Process Model.

The pyramidal structure of intercultural competence involves four levels, which are identical to the frames within the Process Model of Intercultural Competence, i.e. 1. Attitudes, 2. Knowledge, Comprehension and Skills, 3. Desired Internal Outcome, and 4. Desired External Outcome. According to Deardoff, the development of intercultural competence can be addressed from any level, but she highlights that, even though upper levels in the Pyramid Model do not actually depend on lower ones, the latter significantly enhance the former. Thus, a greater degree of intercultural competence is likely to be achieved if learners possess attitudes, knowledge, and skills (Deardorff, 2006).

The latest research in the field of intercultural communication has put forward a new, synthetic concept, that of linguacultural competence, i.e. "the ability to communicate successfully with people from a variety of languages and cultural backgrounds" (Peltonen, Hu, 2025). Linguacultural competence builds on Byram's model of *savoirs*, but it emphasises the role of language, which is inherent to it, and that of the context of communication, being considered an appropriate lens through which transcultural professional communication should be viewed (Peltonen and Hu, 2024; Peltonen and Hu, 2025).

### **3. Integrating Intercultural Competence in Business English Classes**

Traditionally, foreign language classes focused on developing learners' linguistic competence and, subsequently, their communicative competence, while the development of intercultural competence remained unaddressed for a long time (Mebitil, 2023). Things have been different to a certain extent with respect to business English classes, as they have tried to complement the information students receive with respect to intercultural business communication as part of other subjects in their curricula. Students specialising in International Business are generally the only ones who can extensively benefit from dedicated subjects which foster international business relations, such as International Policies, International Business and Trade, International Investment, Comparative Economic Policies, International Financial Markets, World Economic Geography (<https://econ.ubbcluj.ro>; <https://econ.unitbv.ro>; <https://rei.ase.ro>).

The systematic integration of cultural content in the business English class therefore covers an important gap in business students' academic profile. Recent studies have revealed that intercultural competence is beginning to gain prominence in university students' curriculum, becoming part of the national business English curriculum in certain countries (Peltonen and Hu, 2025). The trend is also visible in Romania, where the Romanian Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education mentions knowledge, attitudes, and responsibility and autonomy related to intercultural competence among the thirteen learning outcomes mandatory for all undergraduates in the field of Economics and International Business, the recommended subject for achieving these learning outcomes being Foreign Languages (ARACIS, 2025).

Foreign language classes can and should make a significant contribution to the

development of students' intercultural competence, irrespective of their field of study, even though the main focus of the foreign language class may be primarily on students' linguistic and communicative competence. Specialists argue that the development of these competences can only be artificially separated from that of intercultural competence, first because language is a primary means for embodying cultural practices and beliefs of a society. Secondly, interlocutors always bring into communication their own knowledge of the world, including that about their country and its people, with elements of human and economic geography, cultural products and values (Byram, 1997, p. 22, 32; Peltonen and Hu, 2024; Peltonen and Hu, 2025).

The inclusion of intercultural competence in the foreign language class is generally connected to students' becoming more aware of their own culture and to acquiring knowledge, skills and attitudes with respect to values and norms related to the society whose language they learn (Huang, S. C., 2020). As regards English classes, the perspective should be a much broader one, considering the context of globalisation and the status of English as lingua franca, as the language of international communication and trade par excellence (International Monetary Fund, 2003; Purdy, 2021; Zeng and Yang, 2024). It has been highlighted that communication using business English involves a virtually endless number of permutations of elements connected to companies, their headquarters, regional branches, departments, or employees, conducting a wide range of different operations in locations at national or international level, involving different degrees of responsibilities and different types of interaction between people of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Peltonen and Hu, 2025). Coping with such complex situations and communicating effectively and appropriately requires a very good command of all the subcomponents of intercultural competence: knowledge, skills, attitudes, and cultural awareness. Consequently, if the development of intercultural competence counts as one of the objectives of the business English class, then all the aforementioned components should be addressed during the teaching and learning process.

The inclusion of intercultural competence in the business English class would not prejudice in any way the development of the linguistic and communicative competences. On the contrary, from our perspective, the cultural dimension would represent an appealing and comprehensive background against which all other activities can be introduced. This would not be a novelty for foreign language classes, as reading, audio, or visual input materials are generally related to topics of interest from economics, politics, or human geography. Still, the difference would reside in the emphasis put on intercultural elements in addition to grammar structures, vocabulary items, or receptive and productive language skills, on highlighting them and permanently raising students' awareness about them.

The development of attitudes, awareness, knowledge and skills requires a coherent and systematic pedagogical approach and ideally a framework that can be used in adapted form for different foreign language classes, with students of diverse language proficiency levels, in ways that are efficient and appealing to them, but that are also convenient for foreign language teachers. Considering the specialised literature and our own experience in business English teaching, some of the ways in which the development of intercultural competence in business English classes can be successfully addressed are the following:

1. Providing students with theoretical information about dimensions according to which countries can be positioned: Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism/Collectivism, Masculinity/ Femininity, Long/ Short Term Orientation, Indulgence/Restraint (Hofstede et al., 2010), High/ Low-context cultures, monochronic/polychronic conception of time (Hall, 1976);
2. Providing students with theoretical information about elements of non-verbal communication, such as proxemics, kinesics, paralanguage (tone of voice, pitch, intonation, poses, hesitations, turn-taking, speed of talking), or artefacts (Frendo, 2005; Hall, 1990; Schultz, 1996);
3. Using reading, audio and video materials to raise awareness about cultural differences and their importance in intercultural communication;
4. Providing students with opportunities to acquire knowledge in the following areas (Byram 1997, pp. 58-61; Peltonen and Hu, 2024; Peltonen and Hu, 2025):
  - one's own country and that/ those of the interlocutors, with reference to history, economic development, culture, contemporary relationships between countries, or prominent figures;
  - institutions and organisations that can facilitate business or cultural partnerships;
  - sources of misunderstanding between different cultures;
  - elements of geographical space and the way they are perceived by other countries;
  - social distinctions and the way they are marked (e.g. social classes, professions, clothing, food);
  - private and private institutions and their influence on citizens' lives with respect to one's health, education, financial situation, leisure activity, or social interaction;
5. Supporting students in developing skills related to intercultural competence based on the already acquired knowledge by encouraging them to compare and contrast information of different cultural backgrounds (skills of interpreting/ relating) and to take advantage of all opportunities offered for unmediated contact with people from other cultures (skills of discovery) (Byram 1997, pp. 33, 37-38).
6. Supporting students in developing appropriate attitudes by analysing cultural beliefs, behaviours, and phenomena from different cultural standpoints, and by showing interest in the lives and experiences of people living in other countries (Byram 1997, pp. 32-34, 57-58).
7. Creating opportunities for enhanced exposure to interactions with people coming from other cultures and encourage them to fully engage in intercultural exchanges (Byram, 1997, p. 50). This can be achieved through:
  - students' participation in Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), which always involves partner institutions that are geographically separated but that share a common syllabus or are interested in a number of joint courses previously agreed upon. By involving international teams and putting emphasis on learning through social interaction, COIL facilitates both foreign language learning and intercultural competence development, while enhancing students' cultural awareness, openness and engagement in learning and the community. COIL also has the advantage of being a very inclusive educational practice, involving all

students, and involving costs that can be covered by EU projects (Hackett et al., 2023; Vega Chica, 2025);

- students' participation in Blended Intensive Programmes (BIP), which rely on the cooperation between higher education institutions from several countries and suppose a combination of physical and virtual meetings. The online stage of the programme exhibits the same benefits as COIL, but the benefits of the on-site part are also particularly relevant, as they offer "internationalisation at home" (Jager, 2025). Although the studies on the impact of BIPs on the development of intercultural competence are still scarce, the existing ones and the synopses following BIP activities in different fields show they represent excellent opportunities for students to improve their intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes and to put them into practice (e.g., Beniusiene et al., 2025; Jager, 2025; O'Dowd and Werner, 2024; Slatinska, 2023; <https://ulysseus.eu/news/>; <https://www.aurora.unina.it/>);
- engaging students in activities which make use of immersive technologies, such as VR and AR, which have the potential to significantly impact the teaching and learning process by offering innovative and engaging approaches. These technologies can offer students immersive experiences that simulate real-world encounters with people of different cultural backgrounds and that are otherwise more difficult and costly to access (Liu et al., 2023; Nevoenna et al., 2025; Chornobai et al., 2025).
- capitalising on returning Erasmus students' international experience. The business English class could integrate contributions from students who participated in internships or study mobilities in other countries, who can share their international experience and compare and contrast their knowledge, skills, attitudes and biases before and after the mobility. Their presentations could represent the starting point for a wide range of activities with a cultural or language focus organised by the teacher.
- capitalising on international students' and incoming teachers' participation in class for raising awareness about their countries of origin. They both represent excellent resources for developing intercultural competence, as they bring authenticity to the class and can provide first-hand information.

## 5. Conclusions

The present paper aimed to present the main features of intercultural competence and to introduce some modalities in which it can be developed during business English classes along with the linguistic and communicative competences.

The paper highlighted that, if, for many years, intercultural competence was mostly tackled tangentially and not necessarily consistently, the realities of the increasing globalisation nowadays require business English teachers to find practical, high-impact, and appealing solutions to foster this competence among business students. The activities proposed encourage communication and cooperation among students and between institutions, being appropriate for both face-to-face and online classes and they can be

used adaptively in conjunction with a multitude of teaching methods and for students of all proficiency levels. They also allow students to bring to class and subsequently develop knowledge of their home country and of the world in fields ranging from linguistics to human geography, economics, or diplomacy, and to integrate this into global culture. Another important advantage is represented by their inclusive educational character, as they can benefit the entire class, relying on competences brought by all categories of students, i.e. domestic students having or not having participated in student mobility abroad, incoming Erasmus students, and international students.

The proposed classwork also involves a number of challenges, connected to both teachers and students. Thus, the business English teachers' competences in the field of intercultural communication and their readiness to invest time and effort in further training and in class activity organisation are cornerstones in the implementation of these activities. In addition, one cannot overlook the possible lack of interest on the part of the students or their reluctance towards engaging in activities which extend much over the span of a traditional business English class.

Future research in the field is expected to refine and diversify intercultural competence classwork, to offer solutions for the challenges, and to elicit the contribution of self-directed out-of-class learning to the development of intercultural competence.

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