



Building Intercultural Competence Among Chinese University Students: A Review of Factors Shaping Global Business Readiness

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ABSTRACT

The expansion of international digital commerce has transformed the skills required for participation in global markets, placing intercultural competence at the forefront of cross-border business education. Alongside the increasing influence of e-commerce ecosystems and digital communication platforms, universities are expected to equip students with the cultural and communicative capabilities needed to engage effectively with international stakeholders. In China, this objective is further complicated by limited access to several global social networking platforms, creating distinctive challenges for students preparing for international business careers. Although previous studies have examined the development of intercultural competence, existing evidence remains fragmented because of variations in research contexts, participant groups, and theoretical perspectives.

To consolidate current knowledge, this study presents a systematic literature review of research examining the factors that contribute to intercultural competence among Chinese university students, with particular attention to learners involved in cross-border e-commerce and related international trade disciplines. The reviewed literature was synthesized through thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and influential determinants across diverse educational and professional settings.

The research identified six interrelated dimensions that consistently support the development of intercultural competence: meaningful intercultural interaction, proficiency in business English communication, a global mindset, comprehensive cultural understanding, adaptive capability in multicultural environments, and entrepreneurial orientation. Collectively, these dimensions strengthen students' preparedness for international collaboration and improve their capacity to respond to the demands of global business.

KEYWORDS: Intercultural Competence; Cross-Border E-Commerce; Global Business Education; Business English Communication; Global Mindset.

INTRODUCTION

Global economic integration and digital transformation have fundamentally reshaped the way businesses operate across national boundaries. The rapid expansion of international trade, digital marketplaces, and online communication technologies has created unprecedented opportunities for organizations to engage with customers, suppliers, and strategic partners worldwide. As business interactions

increasingly occur in multicultural environments, the ability to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries has become an essential professional competency rather than an optional skill. Higher education institutions are therefore expected to prepare graduates who can navigate cultural diversity while participating in international business activities [1].

Intercultural competence refers to the knowledge, attitudes,

communication skills, and behavioral flexibility that enable individuals to interact effectively and appropriately with people from different cultural backgrounds. The concept extends beyond language proficiency by incorporating cultural awareness, empathy, openness, critical thinking, and the capacity to adapt to unfamiliar social and professional contexts. Individuals with strong intercultural competence are better equipped to interpret cultural differences, avoid misunderstandings, establish trust, and develop productive international relationships. Consequently, intercultural competence has become a key graduate attribute in disciplines associated with international trade, business management, marketing, and digital commerce.

The continuous growth of cross-border e-commerce (CBEC) has further intensified the demand for graduates who possess intercultural capabilities. Unlike traditional international trade, CBEC relies heavily on digital communication, online negotiation, virtual customer engagement, and collaboration among geographically dispersed stakeholders. Business professionals must communicate with consumers whose purchasing behaviors, cultural expectations, and communication preferences differ considerably across regions. Success in global online markets therefore depends not only on technical expertise and business knowledge but also on the ability to understand cultural norms, adapt communication strategies, and build long-term relationships with international customers [2].

Digital technologies and social media platforms have significantly influenced intercultural communication in recent years. E-commerce ecosystems, online communities, live-streaming platforms, and social networking services have shortened geographical distances while enabling frequent interactions among people from diverse cultural backgrounds. These technologies provide opportunities for authentic intercultural learning through information exchange, collaborative activities, and exposure to different perspectives. At the same time, the digital environment requires users to interpret culturally embedded communication styles, consumer behaviors, and online etiquette, making intercultural competence increasingly important for students preparing for careers in international business.

Within the Chinese higher education context, cultivating intercultural competence presents several distinctive challenges. China has experienced remarkable growth in digital trade and has become one of the world's leading cross-border e-commerce markets. Consequently, universities have expanded programs related to international business, logistics, foreign trade, and electronic commerce to meet the growing demand for skilled professionals. Despite these developments, educational programs often place greater emphasis on technical knowledge, language

instruction, and business operations than on systematic intercultural competence development. As a result, many graduates possess strong disciplinary knowledge but have limited opportunities to develop practical intercultural communication skills through authentic international engagement [3].

Another factor influencing intercultural competence among Chinese university students is the country's unique digital communication environment. Domestic digital platforms dominate online communication, while access to several internationally popular social networking services is restricted under national internet regulations. Although Chinese students actively participate in sophisticated domestic digital ecosystems, their opportunities for spontaneous interaction with users from diverse cultural backgrounds may be comparatively limited [4]. Consequently, many students acquire theoretical knowledge of international business without experiencing sustained intercultural communication in real-world online environments. This gap highlights the need for educational strategies that intentionally create meaningful intercultural learning experiences through international collaboration, virtual exchange programs, multilingual projects, and culturally diverse classroom activities.

Previous research has investigated numerous factors associated with intercultural competence, including foreign language learning, overseas education, multicultural experiences, intercultural training, digital communication, personality characteristics, cultural intelligence, global mindset, and experiential learning. However, existing studies differ considerably in their research settings, participant populations, conceptual frameworks, and measurement approaches. Some studies emphasize language proficiency and communication skills, whereas others focus on cultural knowledge, psychological adaptability, empathy, or international exposure. These variations make it difficult for educators and curriculum designers to determine which factors consistently contribute to intercultural competence development, particularly within the context of Chinese higher education and cross-border e-commerce education [5].

A systematic synthesis of the available evidence is therefore necessary to consolidate current knowledge and identify recurring themes across. Systematic literature reviews provide a transparent and rigorous approach for evaluating previous studies, minimizing selection bias, and generating comprehensive evidence that can inform educational practice and future research. By integrating findings from diverse investigations, such reviews enable researchers to identify influential determinants, research trends, methodological gaps, and practical implications for curriculum development [6].

Against this background, the present study conducts a systematic literature review following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework to examine the factors influencing intercultural competence among Chinese university students, with particular emphasis on learners preparing for careers in cross-border e-commerce and international business. The review synthesizes empirical evidence from existing studies to identify the key dimensions that facilitate intercultural competence development and to provide evidence-based recommendations for educators and policymakers. By consolidating current research, this study seeks to support the design of more effective educational strategies that enhance students' readiness to participate successfully in an increasingly interconnected global business environment [7].

To achieve this objective, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What factors have been identified in the literature as influencing intercultural competence among Chinese university students?

RQ2: How can these factors inform curriculum design and educational practices to strengthen students' preparedness for cross-border e-commerce and global business careers?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) to examine the factors influencing intercultural competence among Chinese university students in the context of global business and cross-border e-commerce. A systematic literature review is a rigorous research approach that enables researchers to identify, evaluate, and synthesize existing scholarly evidence in a transparent and reproducible manner. Compared with traditional narrative reviews, an SLR minimizes selection bias by following predefined procedures for searching, screening, and analyzing relevant studies. Because the objective of this study was to consolidate current knowledge rather than generate primary empirical data, the systematic review approach was considered the most appropriate methodology [8-12].

The review was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The PRISMA framework provides internationally recognized standards for documenting each stage of the review process, thereby enhancing methodological transparency and reproducibility. To facilitate the identification of major research themes and evidence gaps, principles from the PRISMA Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) were also incorporated (Tricco et al., 2018). This complementary framework supported the systematic mapping of concepts, theoretical

perspectives, methodological approaches, and influential factors related to intercultural competence reported across the selected studies. Collectively, these frameworks ensured that the review followed a structured, comprehensive, and scientifically rigorous process [13].

A comprehensive literature search was undertaken to identify relevant peer-reviewed studies published before 2025. Multiple internationally recognized academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis Online, and Google Scholar, were searched because they provide extensive coverage of research in education, international business, intercultural communication, and digital commerce. Searching multiple databases reduced the possibility of omitting significant studies and improved the comprehensiveness of the review [14].

The search strategy was developed using combinations of keywords related to the study objectives. Search terms included expressions such as intercultural competence, cross-cultural competence, Chinese university students, cross-border e-commerce, international business, business English, and global business education. Boolean operators, including AND and OR, were employed to combine search terms and improve retrieval accuracy. In addition to database searching, the reference lists of eligible studies were manually examined to identify additional publications that met the inclusion criteria but were not retrieved through electronic searches [15].

To ensure consistency throughout the review process, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria were established before study selection commenced. Only peer-reviewed journal articles published in English before 2025 were considered for inclusion. Eligible studies were required to investigate intercultural competence or closely related concepts within higher education, international business, foreign trade, or cross-border e-commerce contexts. Studies involving Chinese university students received particular attention because they directly addressed the objectives of the present review. However, research conducted in comparable international higher education settings was also considered when it provided transferable insights into intercultural competence development (Table 1) [16].

Studies were excluded if they consisted of conference abstracts, editorials, book reviews, dissertations, opinion papers, or publications lacking sufficient methodological information. Duplicate records identified across multiple databases were removed before screening. Publications whose primary focus was unrelated to intercultural competence or international business education were also excluded. Applying these predefined criteria enhanced the objectivity and reproducibility of the study selection process [17].

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria Used for Study Selection.

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Conference papers, editorials, books, dissertations
Language	English	Non-English publications
Publication period	Published before 2025	Published in 2025 or later
Research focus	Intercultural competence, higher education, international business, cross-border e-commerce	Unrelated topics
Participants	University students, educators, business professionals	Studies outside the review scope
Methodology	Qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, review studies	Articles without research methodology

Data Extraction

Following the selection of eligible studies, data extraction was performed using a standardized extraction template specifically developed for this review. The template ensured that information was collected consistently across all included studies. Details recorded during extraction included the authors, publication year, country of study, research objectives, research design, participant characteristics, educational context, principal findings, factors influencing intercultural competence, and recommendations for educational practice [18].

To enhance accuracy, extracted information was reviewed independently by two researchers before being consolidated into a master database using Microsoft Excel. Organizing the data in a standardized format facilitated systematic comparison across studies and supported the subsequent thematic synthesis.

Data Analysis

The extracted evidence was analysed using thematic analysis, a qualitative synthesis technique that enables researchers to identify recurring patterns across multiple studies. Initially, relevant findings from each article were carefully examined and coded according to the factors reported to influence intercultural competence. Similar codes were then grouped into broader conceptual categories through an iterative comparison process. These categories were continuously refined until distinct themes emerged that accurately represented the collective evidence reported in the literature [19].

Alongside thematic analysis, descriptive analysis was conducted to summarize publication characteristics, research methodologies, geographical distribution, participant populations, and educational contexts represented in the selected studies. Combining descriptive and thematic analyses enabled the review to identify both general research trends and the major determinants of intercultural competence among Chinese university students. The synthesized findings subsequently formed the basis for discussing implications for curriculum development, educational practice, and future research [20-22].

Quality Assurance

Several measures were implemented to enhance the methodological rigor and trustworthiness of the review. A predefined review protocol guided every stage of the study, while comprehensive database searches minimized publication bias. Independent screening and data extraction by two reviewers reduced the likelihood of subjective judgment during study selection and evidence synthesis. Furthermore, adherence to the PRISMA 2020 reporting guidelines ensured transparency throughout the review process and improved the reproducibility of the findings. These quality assurance procedures strengthen the reliability of the conclusions presented in this systematic literature review [23,24].

RESULTS

The identified a body of peer-reviewed studies examining intercultural competence within higher education, international business, and cross-border e-commerce contexts. Following the application of the predefined eligibility criteria, the final dataset consisted of studies published before 2025 that investigated the development of intercultural competence among university students, educators, and professionals. A noticeable increase in publications was observed after 2020, reflecting growing academic interest in preparing graduates for participation in an increasingly globalized and digitally connected economy. This trend indicates that intercultural competence has become an important research topic because organizations increasingly require employees who can communicate effectively across cultural boundaries and adapt to multicultural workplaces [25].

The reviewed studies represented diverse geographical regions, although China contributed a substantial proportion of the literature. This concentration reflects the rapid expansion of China's cross-border e-commerce sector and the growing demand for graduates equipped with intercultural communication skills. While research from Europe, North America, and Southeast Asia also examined intercultural competence, studies conducted in China placed greater emphasis on international trade, business communication, and digital commerce education. This

geographical distribution demonstrates that intercultural competence is widely recognized as an essential capability, although educational priorities vary according to regional economic and social contexts [26].

The methodological characteristics of the studies included revealed considerable diversity. Quantitative approaches, particularly questionnaire-based surveys, were the most frequently adopted research design because they enabled researchers to evaluate intercultural competence across relatively large participant groups. Qualitative methods, including interviews, classroom observations, and case studies, provided detailed insights into learners' experiences and intercultural development. Several studies employed mixed methods designs to combine statistical evidence with qualitative explanations, thereby producing a more comprehensive understanding of intercultural competence. The diversity of methodological approaches strengthened the overall evidence base by examining the phenomenon from multiple perspectives (Table 2) [27].

Synthesis of Factors Influencing Intercultural Competence

The thematic synthesis revealed that intercultural competence is influenced by multiple interconnected dimensions rather than a single educational or personal factor. Across the selected studies, similar concepts repeatedly emerged despite differences in research settings and participant characteristics. Through comparative analysis, six broad themes were identified that consistently contributed to intercultural competence development among Chinese university students preparing for international

business careers. These themes comprised intercultural engagement, business English proficiency, global mindset, cultural knowledge, adaptability, and entrepreneurial motivation [28].

Intercultural engagement consistently identified as one of the strongest contributors to competence development. Studies demonstrated that students who actively participated in intercultural communication, collaborative learning activities, international exchange programs, or multicultural projects developed greater confidence when interacting with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Direct engagement enabled learners to apply theoretical knowledge in authentic situations, improve communication strategies, and develop greater cultural sensitivity through practical experience [29].

Business English proficiency emerged as another essential determinant. The reviewed studies consistently indicated that language competence extends beyond grammatical accuracy and vocabulary knowledge. Effective communication in international business requires learners to understand professional terminology, negotiation practices, and culturally appropriate communication styles. Students possessing stronger business English skills demonstrated greater confidence in multicultural discussions, international collaboration, and cross-border commercial activities [30].

A global mindset also appeared as a recurring theme throughout literature. Researchers emphasized that openness toward cultural diversity, curiosity about international perspectives, emotional intelligence [31], and willingness to learn from others significantly enhanced

Table 2: Major Themes Identified from systematic literature.

Theme	Description	Contribution to Global Business Readiness
Intercultural Engagement	Participation in multicultural interactions, collaborative learning, international exchange programs, and cross-cultural communication activities.	Enhances practical communication skills, confidence, and relationship-building across cultures.
Business English Proficiency	Ability to communicate effectively using professional English in business and academic contexts.	Improves negotiation, international collaboration, customer communication, and business correspondence.
Global Mindset	Openness toward cultural diversity, curiosity, respect for different perspectives, and willingness to learn from international experiences.	Promotes cultural sensitivity, international cooperation, and effective decision-making in multicultural environments.
Cultural Knowledge	Understanding of cultural values, business etiquette, communication styles, traditions, and social norms.	Reduces cultural misunderstandings and supports effective international business interactions.
Adaptability	Capacity to adjust communication styles, behaviors, and attitudes when interacting with individuals from different cultural backgrounds.	Increases flexibility, resilience, and effectiveness in dynamic global business settings.
Entrepreneurial Motivation	Desire to pursue international business opportunities through innovation, initiative, and continuous learning.	Encourages global opportunity recognition and strengthens international business competitiveness.

intercultural competence. Students demonstrating these characteristics were generally more capable of appreciating cultural differences, reducing ethnocentric attitudes, and establishing productive relationships with international partners (Figure 1).

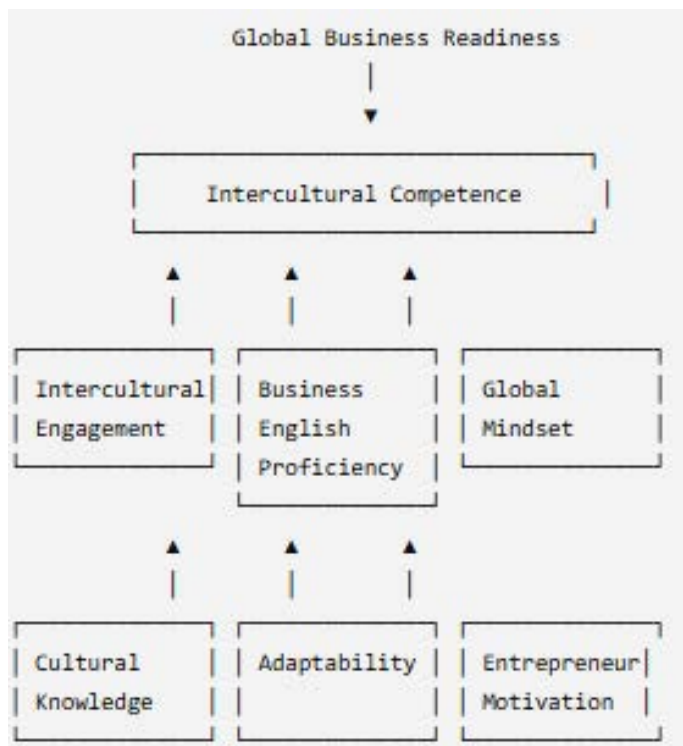


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Factors Contributing to Intercultural Competence among Chinese University Students.

The analysis further indicated that cultural knowledge provides the cognitive foundation for successful intercultural communication. Studies highlighted the importance of understanding cultural values, social norms, business etiquette, communication conventions, and historical contexts when interacting across cultures. Students with

broader cultural knowledge were better prepared to interpret unfamiliar behaviors, avoid misunderstandings, and adapt communication strategies to different international environments [31].

Adaptability represented another major dimension identified across literature. Successful intercultural communication requires individuals to respond flexibly to unfamiliar situations while maintaining effective interpersonal relationships. The reviewed evidence suggested that students with higher levels of emotional regulation, resilience, and perspective-taking ability adjusted more successfully to culturally diverse environments and demonstrated stronger intercultural performance during international business interactions [32].

Entrepreneurial motivation was recognized as an important supporting factor. Several studies reported that students with strong entrepreneurial aspirations showed greater willingness to acquire intercultural knowledge, improve communication skills, and engage with global business opportunities [33]. Entrepreneurial motivation encouraged continuous learning, international networking, and proactive participation in multicultural environments, thereby strengthening overall intercultural competence.

DISCUSSION

The present systematic literature review synthesized published research to examine the factors influencing intercultural competence among Chinese university students preparing for global business and cross-border e-commerce careers. The findings indicate that intercultural competence is a multidimensional construct that develops through the combined influence of educational experiences, language proficiency, cultural awareness, personal attitudes, and professional aspirations. Rather than depending on a single competency, successful intercultural development requires students to integrate communication skills, cultural

Table 3: Educational Implications of the Six Dimensions Influencing Intercultural Competence.

Key Dimension	Educational Implication	Expected Outcome
Intercultural Engagement	Encourage international collaborative projects, virtual exchange programs, and multicultural classroom activities.	Improved intercultural communication and collaborative skills.
Business English Proficiency	Strengthen business English courses with authentic global business scenarios and professional communication tasks.	Enhanced communication effectiveness in international business environments.
Global Mindset	Integrate global case studies, international perspectives, and cross-cultural problem-solving into the curriculum.	Greater openness, cultural awareness, and global thinking.
Cultural Knowledge	Incorporate comparative cultural studies, international business etiquette, and global consumer behavior into teaching.	Better understanding of cultural diversity and reduced communication barriers.
Adaptability	Promote experiential learning, simulations, internships, and intercultural teamwork.	Increased flexibility and confidence in multicultural settings.
Entrepreneurial Motivation	Introduce innovation-based learning, entrepreneurship education, and international business projects.	Stronger entrepreneurial intention and readiness for global business opportunities.



Figure 2: Conceptual Framework Illustrating the Development of Intercultural Competence for Global Business Readiness.

understanding, adaptability, and global perspectives. This highlights the importance of adopting a holistic educational approach that prepares graduates for increasingly interconnected international business environments (Table 3).

Further demonstrates that intercultural engagement and a global mindset are consistently emphasized across the literature as essential foundations for effective cross-cultural communication. Students who actively participate in multicultural learning activities and international collaborations are more likely to develop confidence, empathy, and cultural sensitivity [34,35]. Likewise, business English proficiency and cultural knowledge remain indispensable for successful communication with international stakeholders, enabling students to understand diverse business practices and respond appropriately in multicultural settings. These findings suggest that intercultural competence extends beyond language ability and requires continuous exposure to authentic intercultural experiences (Figure 2).

Another important observation is the growing recognition of adaptability and entrepreneurial motivation as complementary dimensions of intercultural competence. Students who demonstrate flexibility in unfamiliar cultural environments and possess a strong motivation to pursue international opportunities appear better prepared to address the challenges of global business. These qualities encourage lifelong learning, innovation, and resilience, which are increasingly valued by employers operating in international markets. Consequently, higher education institutions should integrate experiential learning [36], international collaboration, and practical business communication into their curricula to strengthen students' readiness for global careers [37].

Overall, the findings reinforce the need for universities to move beyond traditional classroom instruction by creating learning environments that encourage intercultural interaction and global engagement. Future research should investigate how educational interventions influence the long-term development of intercultural competence and evaluate innovative teaching

approaches that combine digital technologies, international collaboration, and experiential learning. Such efforts will contribute to developing graduates who possess the knowledge, attitudes, and professional skills required to succeed in an increasingly globalized economy [38].

CONCLUSION

The intercultural competence is a multidimensional capability that is increasingly essential for Chinese university students preparing for cross-border e-commerce and global business careers. The synthesis identified six interconnected dimensions that consistently contribute to its development: intercultural engagement, business English proficiency, global mindset, cultural knowledge, adaptability, and entrepreneurial motivation. Meaningful interaction with culturally diverse individuals provides students with opportunities to develop practical communication skills, cultural sensitivity, and confidence, while business English proficiency strengthens their ability to participate effectively in international professional contexts. A global mindset and comprehensive cultural knowledge further support openness, respect, and appropriate interpretation of cultural differences, whereas adaptability enables students to respond effectively to unfamiliar multicultural situations. Entrepreneurial motivation complements these capabilities by encouraging students to pursue international opportunities and continuous learning. The findings suggest that Chinese universities should move beyond predominantly theoretical instruction and integrate virtual exchange, international collaboration, experiential learning, authentic business communication, multicultural projects, and entrepreneurship-oriented activities into curricula. Such approaches can provide students with meaningful opportunities to apply intercultural knowledge in realistic contexts. As this review is based on published literature, the findings should be interpreted as a thematic synthesis rather than causal evidence. Future empirical and longitudinal research should evaluate specific educational interventions and their sustained effects on students' intercultural competence and global business readiness.

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