

Intercultural Communication Apprehension and Emotional Intelligence in Higher Education: Preparing Business Students for Career Success

Business Communication Quarterly
76(4) 412–426

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DOI: 10.1177/1080569913501861
bcq.sagepub.com



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Abstract

Given the expanding globalized workforce, business educators continue to seek new ways to prepare students for intercultural encounters. Although immersion in other cultures is the optimal strategy, this method is not always feasible. As such, educators seek other mechanisms to simulate intercultural experiences. This study examines emotional intelligence as a predictor of intercultural communication apprehension among university students ($N = 425$). Results indicate that three of the emotional intelligence subscales predict intercultural communication apprehension: emotionality, sociability, and self-control. These results support the premise that emotional intelligence manages and/or reduces intercultural communication apprehension and therefore should be integrated in business curriculum.

Keywords

business communication, intercultural communication apprehension, emotional intelligence, curriculum

The increasingly interconnected nature of the global economy exposes workers to cultural differences and opportunities for information exchange with people from around the world. Business educators are, therefore, providing students with an

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essential set of tools for success in business as well as in diplomacy and international relations (Morreale & Pearson, 2008). University students are not only being trained in intercultural communication on campus, they are also experiencing it with the internationalization of higher education in general becoming unavoidable (Stier, 2006). Colleges and universities can and should encourage this intercultural experience, as “higher education is concerned with cultural diversity issues, both to enhance students’ experiences on campus and to prepare them to function in their careers and in the larger society” (Zimmermann, 1995, p. 321).

The increasing internationalization of university campuses does not guarantee by itself that business students are receiving adequate intercultural communication instruction (Otten, 2003). The danger is that intercultural contact without intercultural communication training may encourage prejudices and stereotypes among university students interacting with students from other cultures. This danger was explored by Spencer-Rodgers and McGovern (2002) who reported that U.S.-born university students felt negative prejudice toward foreign students, including feeling “uncomfortable, impatient, and frustrated when encountering communication difficulties with the international students on their campuses” (p. 623). Increased amounts of intercultural contact alone did not work to reduce these negative feelings.

Given the globalized economy in which business students will soon be immersed, intercultural communication training is essential. The purpose of this article is to examine individuals’ apprehension prompted by intercultural communication and the relationship it may have with their emotional intelligence. The hope is to identify a potential cognitive tool (emotional intelligence) through which students can manage intercultural communication apprehension.

Intercultural Communication

Intercultural interactions are becoming increasingly more important within the workforce of multinational organizations as well as for the international student bodies represented among modern higher education facilities (Durant & Shepherd, 2009). Intercultural communication has been defined beyond strictly nationality differences to include differences in beliefs and/or ethnicities (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005; Durant & Shepherd, 2009). Gudykunst (2005a, 2005b) summarized that scholars of intercultural communication take one of three approaches: (a) theories asserting that culture and the communication process itself have been combined (e.g., constructivist theory, coordinated management of meaning, speech code theory); (b) theories describing or explaining how communication changes among different cultures (e.g., Hofstede’s dimensions of culture variability, face-negotiation, expectancy violation theory); and (c) theories that describe or explain effective communication between people for different cultures (e.g., cultural convergence theory, effective decision making theory, anxiety/uncertainty management theory).

Intercultural communication researchers urge looking beyond geography to define cultures. Intercultural communication research that utilizes political states or geographical regions to distinguish cultures could misrepresent results because culture is

dictated by beliefs and lifestyles rather than geography (Casmir, 1999). Intercultural communication is not purely contained within the confines of verbal interaction but can include sign systems and behaviors, all of which may be influenced by any historical backdrop between interacting cultures (Durant & Shepherd, 2009).

Casmir (1999) suggests that intercultural communication should be approached with the understanding that humans are constantly changing; therefore, culture should not be viewed as an endpoint but as a fluid and chaotic environment. Through intercultural communication, humans can make their own contributions to changes in culture and their understanding of it (Casmir, 1999). Interpersonal communication themes (e.g., listening and eye contact) are also identifiers of competent intercultural communication (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005). An individual who displays openness to others (e.g., effective communication) is aware of and shows regard to differences, and has experienced these differences enough to be aware of them, is thereby a competent intercultural communicator (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005). Sensation seekers, people who have a desire to experience new and novel things, tend to have higher intercultural communication competence than nonsensation seekers (Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2011).

Arasaratnam's (2006) study revealed a model of intercultural communication competence in which positive attitudes toward culturally different people contribute to the motivation to communicate with these people, ultimately leading to experiences that enhance intercultural communication competence. By empathizing, an individual displays attributes of being a more effective listener, which gives the perception of being more adaptive toward intercultural communication (Arasaratnam, 2006; Gibson & Zhong, 2005). Within the health care environment, medical providers who had lived outside of the United States for more than 3 months have been found to be better intercultural communicators, demonstrating the positive relationship between intercultural experience and effectiveness of intercultural communication (Gibson & Zhong, 2005). Chen (2010) suggests that respect of other cultures and the enjoyment derived from an intercultural experience also result in improved intercultural communication.

The implications from the field of intercultural communication imply that exposure to intercultural communication increases competence. The more immersive the exposure, the more effective the communicator becomes. Additionally, research has demonstrated that ethnocentrism and intercultural communication apprehension impede intercultural communication (Chen, 2010; Neuliep, 2012; Shuya, 2007). Because not all students will be immersed interculturally before graduation, it is the responsibility of educators to identify techniques to enhance these students' competency. The literature implies that greater intercultural communication competence can be achieved through reducing apprehension of intercultural encounters.

Intercultural Communication Apprehension. Uncertainty in communication leads to anxiety (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Uncertainty in communication with an individual from another culture leads to a specific form of anxiety known as *intercultural communication apprehension* (ICA; Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997). Cognitive disconnect

leads to uncertainty, which induces anxiety that manifests both physiologically and emotionally (Goldin, Manber, Hakimi, Canli, & Gross, 2009). Such anxiety can cause heightened physiological arousal, hypervigilance to bodily reactions, dread of visual scrutiny, fear of revealing the anxiety, and perceived loss of control (Horwitz, 2002). The greater uncertainty individuals have during intercultural communication encounters, the higher their anxiety (Neuliep & Ryan, 2009). As apprehension of intercultural communication increases, individuals are less willing to participate in these interactions (Lin & Rancer, 2003a). This can lead to decreased tolerance and increased contempt toward people of another culture. If the levels of ICA can be decreased, then an individual's willingness to communicate with another culture can be increased (Chen, 2010; Lin & Rancer, 2003a; Neuliep, 2012).

A few studies have looked at ICA with regard to particular demographic variables. Lin and Rancer (2003b) found that men were more prone to experiencing ICA than women. A study within an international school found that teachers with higher levels of communication apprehension initially had lower communication competence, but as they became more culturally aware, communication apprehension was decreased (Monthienvichienchai, Bhikulbhanuwaty, Kasemsuk, & Speece, 2002). Among international teaching assistants, ICA was negatively related to satisfaction and quality of relationships with students, which resulted in a negative spiral of communication avoidance between students and international teaching assistants (Roach & Olaniran, 2001).

Emotional Intelligence

A cognitive variable that predicts social adaptability and decreases social anxiety is emotional intelligence (Vera, 2008). Emotional Intelligence (EI) has been conceptualized as the ability to precisely comprehend emotions and the use of emotional knowledge to augment cognition (Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008). Additionally, EI has been defined as an individual's ability to perceive, express, and process emotional thoughts while understanding, reasoning through, and regulating emotions in ones' self as well as in others (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Goleman (1998) explained EI in terms of the workplace, identifying EI as emotional management that allows people to work through emotions to achieve common goals. Bar-On (2006) defined EI as "a cross-section of interrelated emotional and social competencies, skills, and facilitators that determine how effectively we understand and express ourselves, understand others and relate with them, and cope with daily demands" (p. 3). Bar-On (2006) also considered EI to include noncognitive capabilities, competencies, and skills that influence one's ability to succeed in coping with environmental demands and pressures. Notably, EI is a learned skill and can be developed over the course of one's life with growth seen through maturation and the ability to accept change (Colfax, Rivera, & Perez, 2010).

Goleman (1998) claimed that those with a high EI will be more team-oriented, more cooperative, help each other learn together, and engaged in overall enhanced social experiences. Varying levels of EI, in the form of emotional regulation, have

been found to relate to social competency and social behaviors in children as early as kindergarten (Eisenberg et al., 1995; Eisenberg, Fabes, Guthrie, & Reiser, 2000). Men with higher EI report using less socially destructive strategies and are judged to have higher social competence (Brackett, Rivers, Shiffman, Lerner, & Salovey, 2006). Adults with higher EI have been shown to possess greater social competence and report less use of disruptive interpersonal strategies (Brackett et al., 2006; Lopes et al., 2004). Perceptions of high EI individuals tend to be more positive, thereby exhibiting higher empathy and more social adeptness than others with lower EI (Brackett et al., 2006; Lopes et al., 2004; Lopes, Salovey, Côté, & Beers, 2005).

Within the workplace, one's ability to regulate his/her own and another's emotion is directly linked to their own job satisfaction and turnover intentions, mediated by the quality of their relationship with the other individual (Jordan & Troth, 2011). Judgment of emotions, optimism, and social competence are positively related to job performance (Moon & Hur, 2011). Among human services workers, participants reporting higher levels of EI reported lower levels of work-related stress and health issues (Ogińska-Bulik, 2005). These results indicated that the ability to understand accurately and facilitate EI in the workplace could lower the experienced levels of stress among employees. Jorfi, Jorfi, Yacob, and Shah (2011) demonstrated a strong positive relationship between EI and effectiveness of communication among employees. Though high EI employees are more effective communicators, these employees tend to experience more emotional exhaustion because they analyze the use of emotion in themselves and others more often than employees with low EI (Moon & Hur, 2011).

Effective global leaders are characterized as having high levels of emotional intelligence (Colfax et al., 2010; Kerr, Garvin, Heaton, & Boyle, 2006). In fact, Rosete and Ciarrochi (2005) recommend hiring managers based on individual EI scores because it is of equal importance for managers to be able to engage effectively with colleagues and associates (i.e., EI) as it is to deliver business outputs. Subordinates have been found to perceive their supervisors as more effective when the supervisor utilized increased levels of EI (Kerr et al., 2006). Lam and O'Higgins (2012) conclude that leaders who employ EI will show changes in the way they think and behave, which will ultimately lead to increased job satisfaction for their subordinates.

Emotional Intelligence in the Business Curriculum. Business educators must prepare students to interact with individuals from any culture, but they should particularly prepare students for working in another culture where they will experience the least familiarity. Gudykunst (1998) explains that although hosts also may feel the tension and worry when placed into a communication situation with a stranger, strangers tend to feel the most anxiety because they are technically in an out-group. When strangers' anxiety is above the maximum threshold during intercultural communication, they may be too afraid to truly connect with the host, and will instead choose to rely on their own cultural norms, which requires less consideration (Gudykunst, 1998), thereby using their own cultural frames of reference.

Sigmar, Hynes, and Hill (2012) recommend a variety of classroom activities that can be introduced to the business and professional communication curriculum for

emotional intelligence training purposes. They discuss use of having students complete an emotional matrix activity, a “magic carpet” assignment, a corporate blinding exercise, and a role-playing exercise. Mabry (2011) illustrated that students can become involved emotionally, behaviorally, and cognitively in ecological and social sustainability issues by introducing a holistic teaching approach (e.g., experiential and simulation based) to business course assignments; doing so enhances students’ emotional competencies. Another study by Myers and Tucker (2005) suggests that simply exposing students to EI theory will enhance their EI. These authors also recommend using an array of teaching strategies, including journaling, role-playing, interviewing, and case analysis to strengthen students’ emotional competence, which they believe is valuable for students’ acclimation in the business field.

In short, individuals with higher EI are more adaptive in communicative situations such that EI can act as a management device or inoculation for anxiety associated with communicating interculturally. Given this possibility, it is important to investigate the relationship between EI and ICA. EI training may serve to be an effective method of preparing business students for future workplace intercultural communication.

Method

The purpose of this study is to identify whether EI is an inverse predictor of ICA. Examining this influence has pragmatic implications for business educators who seeking to prepare students to engage in a globalized workforce though the possibility of using EI enhancement as intercultural communication preparation. This will be investigated through survey methodology using previously validated measures of both EI and ICA, so that the relationships between the variables can be established.

Participants

This study sampled 425 undergraduate students enrolled in public speaking courses at a medium-sized Southeastern university. Students in this course were given the option of enrolling in a human subjects pool to participate in 2 hours of research throughout the semester from a wide selection of studies in lieu of a small writing assignment. Because the course serves a general education function for the university, participants in this human subjects pool are representative of a large cross-section of undergraduate majors and thus a wide cross-section of social training with students required to take various amounts of courses in interpersonal and intercultural communication (sometimes having no communication requirement) dependent on their major. It was for the representative nature and convenience of the subject pool that participants were recruited from this source. Limitations were set on the questionnaire: Subjects were only eligible to participate in this study if they were at least 18 years old, had never studied abroad, and had never lived in another country. On average, subjects were $M = 19.99$ ($SD = 2.52$) years old. Females composed 40% of the sample and males

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics.

	n	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	Skewness		Kurtosis	
						Statistic	Std. error	Statistic	Std. error
EI	425	3.10	6.83	5.2281	0.68502	-.219	.118	-.197	.236
ICA	425	1.00	7.00	2.8601	1.09578	.417	.118	.323	.236
Self-Control	425	1.40	7.00	4.4588	0.91797	-.137	.118	.209	.236
Emotionality	425	2.63	7.00	5.0944	0.84563	-.318	.118	-.283	.236
Sociability	425	1.33	7.00	5.1376	0.90896	-.264	.118	.242	.236
Well-Being	425	1.50	7.00	5.7200	0.97379	-1.010	.118	.821	.236

Note. ICA = intercultural communication apprehension; EI = emotional intelligence.

composed 60%. Subjects' year in school broke down as follows: 47% freshmen, 22% sophomores, 11% juniors, 19% seniors, and 1% other. Consistent with university demographics, subjects were mainly White followed by considerably smaller proportions of Black, Latino, Asian, and Native American.

Procedures

The study took place during the fall 2011 semester. All subjects received a hyperlink to the study's website. The link took subjects to a welcome screen for the questionnaire where the study was described as an attempt to understand intercultural communication among college students. Subjects were instructed that, by clicking *next*, they would be giving their consent to participate in the study. After clicking *next*, subjects were then directed to the main questionnaire where they were asked to complete two measures and provide specific demographic information. Subjects needed approximately 15 minutes to finish the questionnaire. The response rate for this method of solicitation within the human subjects pool was approximately 23%.

Instrumentation

ICA was measured using Neuliep and McCroskey's (1997) Personal Report of the Intercultural Communication Apprehension measure. This is the standard measure for ICA. The authors report that the measure has excellent face and convergent validity. The measure consisted of 14 Likert-type items with a 7-point response scale ranging from *Disagree Strongly* to *Agree Strongly*. The reliability score for this measure was $\alpha = .95$. Descriptive statistics for this measure can be found in Table 1.

EI was measured using the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire–Short Form (Petrides & Furnham, 2006). The measurement model is second-order unidimensional, composed of four submeasures. The authors report excellent content and face validity. This measure was chosen because of its validity evidence and conciseness. The measure consisted of 30 Likert-type items with 7-point response scales ranging from *Agree*

Table 2. Results: Linear Regression.

	β	Beta
Constant	7.276	
Self-Control	-.143*	-.120*
Emotionality	-.417*	-.322*
Sociability	-.322*	-.267*
Well-Being	.001	.000

* $p < .05$.

Strongly to Disagree Strongly. Petrides and Furnham (2006) provide evidence to validate four dimensions of EI: well-being (a generalized sense of well-being burgeoned from past achievement), self-control (ability to control one's internal urges), emotionality (belief that one possesses a plethora of skills related to emotions), and sociability (the ability to wield social influence). The reliability score for the overall measure was $\alpha = .89$. The reliability scores for the four submeasures were as follows: Well-Being ($\alpha = .84$), Self-Control ($\alpha = .60$), Emotionality ($\alpha = .62$), and Sociability ($\alpha = .72$). Descriptive statistics for this measure can be found in Table 1.

Results

This study hypothesized that emotional intelligence would predict intercultural communication apprehension: higher levels of EI would be associated with lower levels of ICA. Because the EI measure is second-order unidimensional, it can capture the higher order construct of EI reflected in each dimension as well as individual dimensions of EI. Both the higher order construct and individual dimensions were examined.

First, a Pearson correlation was run to determine the relationship between EI and ICA ($r = -.51, p < .05$). A linear regression was then run to provide insight regarding the effect EI has on ICA. Three of the subdimensions of the EI instrument were statistically significant predictors of intercultural communication apprehension: self-control, emotionality, and sociability ($R^2 = .33, p < .05$). The linear regression results are reported in Table 2. The results of both analyses were consistent with expectations.

Discussion

The results from this study confirmed a negative relationship between emotional intelligence and intercultural communication apprehension. The implication of this finding is that individuals with higher emotional intelligence may be able to mitigate apprehension caused by intercultural communication. Essentially, individuals with higher emotional intelligence, who are more capable of reading the moods and needs of others, may be adaptable to avoid the physical and physiological effects of communication apprehension. Individuals who display lower communication apprehension are perceived to be more competent and intelligent, which are two important

characteristics for emerging young professionals (Richmond & McCroskey, 1998). As such, given the findings of this study, methods to bolster students' EI should be considered to impact their ICA.

Notably, in this study only three of the four subdimensions of EI predicted ICA; self-control, emotionality, and sociability were statistically significant predictors and well-being was not. There are two potential reasons for this result. First, while the participants of this study believed that they had high control over their behavioral urges, a wide range of emotional skills, and social influence, it may be that they felt uncertain about the success of their past social interactions because these other traits and abilities have suddenly emerged. This sudden emergence of untested EI is, however, unlikely. The more probable explanation is that well-being was not a statistically significant predictor due to measurement error. While well-being had the highest reliability score, indicating that this set of items was answered in the same pattern by the most participants, it was subject to a substantive amount of skewness and kurtosis compared with the other submeasures, which speaks to greater potential problems with the well-being submeasure than the reliability score implies (see Table 1).

Petrides and Furnham (2006) distinguish a difference between *trait EI*, an individual's emotional self-efficacy that was measured for this study, and *ability EI*, which is one's true cognitive-emotional abilities. Because individuals may have greater confidence in their emotional self-efficacy than is truly merited when merely imagining being placed in an uncomfortable or new position, they may overestimate their emotional intelligence. Yet in situations where creating the conditions necessary for a behavioral EI test are impractical, as is the majority of EI research, survey research and assessments of trait EI are common. Nonetheless, this study was overall limited by EI measurement problems. Though the compiled EI measure had a strong reliability score, the reliability scores of all submeasures were relatively low. Howitt and Cramer (2005) state that reliability scores ranging from $\alpha = .60$ to $.70$ are considered *okay* and are often seen in social science where measurement is constantly being refined. Yet because of the validity portfolio provided with the EI measure utilized for the present study (Petrides & Furnham, 2006), the authors are confident in the findings consistent with a negative relationship between EI and intercultural communication apprehension.

These findings, which support that EI may mitigate ICA, lead to a simple academic outcome: Higher education business faculty should strongly consider integrating EI into their business and professional communication curriculum. This idea that more emotionally intelligent students are more effective and culturally competent young professionals is not novel. Collaco et al. (2008) found that increased emotional intelligence among university students leads to significantly reduced ethnocentrism, a belief that one's own culture is superior to all others. Khlupin (1999) illustrated that the higher an individual's emotional awareness, the more effective are his/her communication skills. Stone (2006) and Otten (2003) claim that emotion and anxiety management lessons are important for preparing students for future intercultural communication encounters. As such, practical implications for infusing EI in business and professional communication curriculum are provided.

Practical Implications for Business Educators

In the effort to prepare students for the globalized business world, integration of EI training into the curriculum should be considered. Within the framework of business education, suggestions for integrating EI training include conducting lectures and workshops to teach students about emotional intelligence personal competencies (self-awareness, self-regulation, self-motivation) and social competencies (social awareness and social skills) and their relevance to the workforce. Additional suggestions include examining case studies that focus on the benefits of EI or identifying the most emotionally intelligent strategy to resolve conflict; developing communication campaigns that use EI communication strategies and tactics; and having students conduct research that explores how EI can help an organization, a client, or other key constituents.

When developing such teaching activities focused specifically within the intercultural context, Stone (2006) suggests utilizing the following design criteria: activity elements must appear consistently in the existing intercultural effectiveness literature; activity elements must be generic, as opposed to specific to a certain culture, cultures, or field of application; and the activity elements must be perceived as relatively learnable rather than innate personality traits. The goals of such activities are to make students aware of their emotions and the emotions of others. As such, specific EI skills that should be taught include active listening (Arasaratnam, 2006; Gibson & Zhong, 2005), identifying the rationale behind their own emotions, and identifying how both they themselves and the other communicator feel in the moment, particularly when the feelings are related to stress (Goleman, 1995, 1998). Future research should attempt to refine specific activities for enhancing EI.

Notably, efforts to enhance intercultural communication skills must be handled with care. A number of studies (e.g., Fineman, 2004; Hughes, 2005; Lorbiecki & Jack, 2002; Munshi & McKie, 2001) caution forcing behavioral changes on workers within an organization in the name of diversity management. Likewise, forced intercultural interaction between students on campus has been noted to increase cross-cultural hostility (Spencer-Rodgers & McGovern, 2002). Such forced accommodation can foster aggression among cultural groups. For this reason, intercultural communication should always be approached in the classroom in terms of awareness, adaptively, and collaboration rather than forced behavioral change.

Conclusions

In closing, the authors agree with Barchard (2003), who states that "EI is not the panacea that some writers claim" (p. 856). But the authors also agree with many other researchers, such as Humphrey, Curran, Morris, Farrell, and Woods (2007), who suggest that further studies should be conducted among business students to determine more effective ways for infusing EI-based decision making and critical thinking in the business classroom as these skills will reduce ICA in future business interactions. Many business and professional communication educators already realize the importance of integrating these skills in the college classroom. As such, continued research

regarding the infusion of EI training in the classroom, particularly as a tool for reducing intercultural communication apprehension, is encouraged.

Authors' Note

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Student comments are reproduced by permission.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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