



# Developing Intercultural Competence in International Education: A Qualitative Study of Training Needs in Spanish SMEs

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## Article History:

Received: 31-07-2025

Revision: 18-09-2025

Accepted: 11-10-2025

Publication: 09-10-2025

## Cite this article as:

AguarelesmBautista, M., Nevado-Llopis, A., & Sierra-Huedo, M. L. (n.d.). Key Elements for Intercultural Training: A Contextual Model for Spanish Small and Medium Enterprises in International Education. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 25(4), 135-148. doi.org/10.36923/jicc.v25i4.1266

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**Abstract:** The international education sector requires professionals to collaborate daily with culturally diverse colleagues, clients, and partner institutions. While this diversity enriches organizational practice, it also generates recurring communication challenges that demand strong intercultural competence. In many small and medium-sized Spanish enterprises (SMEs), however, such competence is developed informally, without systematic training or organizational support. This study aims to examine how intercultural challenges emerge in everyday business interactions and to design a context-specific training model for SMEs operating in international education. A qualitative case study was conducted using semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and nine months of participant observation within a Spanish SME. Data were analyzed thematically to identify communication patterns, sources of intercultural tension, and existing informal learning practices. Findings show that cultural misunderstandings frequently disrupt collaboration and negotiation processes, leading to delays, strained relationships, and inconsistent responses to conflict. Although participants recognized the importance of cultural awareness, intercultural competence was rarely defined explicitly and was often acquired through trial-and-error rather than intentional professional development. Leadership emerged as a critical factor, yet managers themselves lacked structured preparation. Based on these insights, the study outlines key components of effective intercultural training and proposes a practice-oriented program integrating cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral dimensions of competence. The study concludes that intercultural competence must be developed systematically to strengthen international partnerships in Spanish SMEs. The proposed training model offers a feasible, context-sensitive solution with potential applicability to other organizations operating in multicultural environments.

**Keywords:** Intercultural Competence, Intercultural Communication, International Education, Intercultural Training, Cross-Cultural Management, Cross-Cultural Negotiation, SMEs in Spain

## 1. Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world, cultural diversity has become a defining characteristic of contemporary professional environments, especially in sectors such as international education. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operating in this field interact daily with students, families, institutional partners, and colleagues from multiple cultural, linguistic, and national backgrounds. While such diversity undoubtedly enriches professional practice, it also introduces layers of communicative and operational complexity that require more than technical expertise or linguistic proficiency (Bennett, 2015; Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001;). The ability to navigate these complexities depends on intercultural competence, a multidimensional construct that shapes how professionals interpret cultural cues, manage relationships, and negotiate meaning across cultural boundaries.

This article presents the qualitative phase of a broader doctoral research project examining intercultural leadership and negotiation in Spanish SMEs within the international education sector. It builds upon earlier quantitative findings published in *Entreculturas* (ref. to be added), which identified a strong relationship between intercultural competence and positive negotiation outcomes. Whereas the quantitative phase measured competence levels and correlations, the present qualitative study seeks to understand how intercultural competence is enacted, interpreted, and developed in everyday professional interactions. Particular attention is given to the extent to which structured training, or its absence, shapes practitioners' ability to work effectively across cultures.

The empirical basis of this study is a single, information-rich case: Newlink Education, a Spanish SME with more than two decades of experience in international education and mobility programs. Through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups, the study explores how employees and managers conceptualize intercultural competence, how they respond to intercultural challenges, and how these responses are shaped by existing organizational practices. The case-study design aligns with an interpretivist approach, which views intercultural competence as emerging from lived experience and social interaction rather than from isolated individual traits.

The research is grounded in the premise that linguistic fluency, although necessary, is insufficient for effective intercultural communication. As Bennett (2015) and Deardorff (2009)

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argue, meaningful intercultural engagement requires the ability to shift perspectives, tolerate ambiguity, and adapt behaviors to culturally diverse expectations. These capabilities are particularly critical in SMEs, where limited resources often prevent the development of formal training systems and where intercultural learning frequently unfolds informally, through trial and error, accumulated experience, and ad hoc support from colleagues.

The Spanish context offers a compelling setting for examining these dynamics. SMEs in the international education industry serve as intermediaries between global partners and local institutions, coordinating programs that depend on constant intercultural interaction. Yet previous studies suggest that professionals in this sector often navigate cultural differences without sufficient training, institutional frameworks, or strategic guidance (Aneas, 2010; Elboj Saso, Valero Errazu, Iñiguez Berrozpe & Gómez Bahillo, 2017; Rey, Caro González & Balhadi, 2016). As Aneas (2010) notes, intercultural competence must be understood as a holistic combination of cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral dimensions, all of which require intentional development. Without such development, professionals may rely on intuitive, reactive, or culturally biased strategies when addressing intercultural challenges.

Leadership further complicates this landscape. Although leaders shape the organizational conditions under which intercultural competence is fostered, many SMEs continue to operate with monocultural leadership models that inadequately address the dynamics of multicultural collaboration (Aritz & Walker, 2014). The ability of leaders to recognize cultural assumptions, manage diverse teams, and adapt communication styles directly influences how intercultural challenges are handled within their organizations.

Taken together, these considerations highlight the pressing need for structured, context-sensitive, and theoretically grounded training programs that can support SMEs in developing robust intercultural capabilities. By analyzing lived experiences within an SME where the researcher served in a senior leadership role for over a decade, this study provides an insider–outsider perspective that enables a nuanced understanding of the complexities, limitations, and opportunities associated with intercultural competence development in organizational settings.

## 2. Literature Review

This section outlines the study’s theoretical foundations across two key dimensions: (1) intercultural competence in organizations and (2) training for the development of intercultural competence. These aspects are especially relevant in international education, where professionals navigate cultural diversity daily, often with limited institutional support.

### 2.1. Intercultural Competence in Organizational Contexts

Intercultural competence (IC) has become an essential requirement for professionals working in increasingly multicultural and transnational environments. Beyond linguistic fluency, IC encompasses a dynamic combination of cognitive, affective, and behavioral capacities that enable individuals to interpret cultural cues, negotiate meaning, and adapt their communication and actions across diverse contexts (Bennett, 2015; Deardorff, 2009). In organizational settings, this competence extends beyond individual attributes and becomes a strategic resource that shapes collaboration, negotiation, conflict resolution, and organizational performance. Scholars emphasize that IC evolves progressively through critical reflection and repeated engagement with cultural diversity, rather than being a static skillset acquired once and applied uniformly across situations (Aneas, 2010; Byram, Nichols & Stevens, 2001; Sierra-Huedo & Nevado-Llopis, 2022).

Despite increasing recognition of its importance, the operationalization of intercultural competence within organizations remains uneven. Carballal-Broome and Pinillos (2020) show that miscommunication and cultural bias continue to hinder teamwork and client relationships, particularly when professionals rely on intuition or stereotypes rather than intentional intercultural strategies. Similarly, Elboj Saso et al. (2017) argue that many organizations reduce IC to superficial notions of etiquette or language mastery, thereby neglecting its deeper psychological, relational, and contextual dimensions. Such conceptual simplifications make it difficult to design robust assessment tools or to implement meaningful training interventions. This gap is particularly evident in SMEs, where limited resources and informal learning cultures can restrict the institutionalization of more structured competency-development processes.

Leadership represents a critical, although sometimes overlooked, component of IC in organizations. While not the central focus of this study, leadership shapes the conditions under which intercultural competence is fostered, modeled, and transmitted across teams. Leading in intercultural settings requires more than managing tasks or coordinating workflows; it necessitates an ability to recognize and navigate cultural assumptions, build trust across diverse groups, and facilitate inclusive communication. As Contreras, Barbosa, and Piñeros (2015) suggest, contemporary leaders must “lead for diversity,” meaning they must integrate intercultural awareness into decision-making, relational practices, and organizational culture. When leaders lack such awareness, their actions can unintentionally reinforce monocultural assumptions, restrict open dialogue, or exacerbate intercultural tensions.

These dynamics are especially salient in SMEs within international education, where professionals are simultaneously responsible for negotiating with international partners, supporting students abroad, and interacting with culturally diverse colleagues. In such settings, leadership and negotiation practices cannot follow standardized cultural scripts; rather, they require situational flexibility and sensitivity to culturally shaped expectations regarding authority, communication, and relationship-building. Without these competencies, misunderstandings can easily escalate, undermining both operational efficiency and professional relationships.

To explain these intercultural challenges, classical cultural frameworks remain influential, though not without limitations. Hofstede’s (1980, 2001) cultural dimensions, such as power distance, collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation, continue to offer insight into how culturally shaped values influence workplace behaviors. The GLOBE project (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman & Gupta, 2004) expanded this perspective by identifying culturally contingent leadership expectations across ten cultural clusters. Both frameworks demonstrate that leadership traits perceived as effective in one cultural context may be interpreted negatively in another, underscoring the situated nature of managerial practices. Likewise, Hall’s (1976) distinction between high- and low-context communication styles clarifies why directness, implicitness, and non-verbal cues can be sources of misunderstanding in intercultural encounters. These theories remain useful tools for interpreting

challenges in international education, where professionals must constantly navigate culturally diverse expectations surrounding communication, time, agreements, and interpersonal relationships.

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner's (1997) cultural dimensions further illuminate how universalism versus particularism, or sequential versus synchronic time orientations, shape negotiations and decision-making processes. For example, universalist cultures tend to adhere closely to rules and written agreements, whereas particularist cultures may prioritize the relational context over contractual rigidity. Similarly, synchronic cultures often display greater flexibility in time management, which can be misinterpreted by counterparts from sequential cultures as inefficiency or lack of professionalism. In international education, where coordination across multiple stakeholders is constant, such differences can become critical sources of tension.

Although these frameworks offer valuable interpretive tools, scholars increasingly note that intercultural competence cannot be reduced to national-level differences or fixed cultural templates (Deardorff, 2009; Sierra-Huedo, 2018). Traditional models often assume cultural homogeneity within national groups and overlook the dynamic, negotiated, and contextual nature of intercultural interactions. This limitation is particularly relevant in SMEs, where professional identities, organizational cultures, and situational pressures intersect with national cultural expectations, creating hybrid cultural spaces that cannot be fully captured by static typologies.

In response to these critiques, contemporary research emphasizes intercultural competence as a developmental process rather than a set of prescriptive behaviors. Deardorff's (2006) process-oriented model highlights the role of attitudes, such as openness, curiosity, and respect, alongside knowledge and skills, while Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) conceptualizes intercultural growth as a shift from ethnocentric to ethnorelative worldviews. These perspectives frame IC as emergent and iterative, requiring ongoing reflection, emotional regulation, and adaptive behavior. Leadership theories also contribute to this conceptual shift. Adler and Bartholomew (1992), for instance, identify global leadership competencies that closely align with intercultural effectiveness, including the ability to interpret multiple value systems, collaborate with multicultural teams, and engage others from a position of equality. Aritz and Walker (2014) and Kudirat (2022) caution that leadership models developed in monocultural environments may be inadequate in diverse contexts, underscoring the need for intercultural perspectives in organizational theory.

Empirical research further suggests that intercultural competence does not emerge automatically through professional experience or international mobility. Pérez Cañado and Méndez García (2007) found persistent communication breakdowns and role ambiguity in multicultural teams in Spain, despite participants' prior exposure to international environments. Similarly, Aneas (2010) and Sierra-Huedo (2018) argue that without structured learning, individuals tend to fall back on intuitive strategies shaped by their own cultural frameworks, which may perpetuate misunderstandings rather than resolve them. These findings highlight the importance of intentional learning processes and organizational support, particularly in contexts like international education, where intercultural interactions are frequent and consequential.

Taken together, the literature demonstrates that intercultural competence is a complex, evolving, and context-dependent capability that requires more than experience or linguistic ability. It demands purposeful development, organizational commitment, and leadership engagement, elements that remain unevenly implemented in many SMEs. These gaps provide a meaningful foundation for examining how intercultural competence is understood and developed within the international education sector, and why targeted training interventions may be necessary to strengthen organizational effectiveness in multicultural environments.

## 2.2. Training For Developing Intercultural Competence

Intercultural training is widely regarded as one of the most effective mechanisms for developing intercultural competence in organizational settings. Defined as a structured set of educational interventions that cultivate professionals' ability to perform effectively in culturally diverse environments, intercultural training seeks to translate theoretical insights into practical, workplace-oriented skills (Aneas, 2009; Bhauk & Brislin, 1992; Cushner, 1989). In contrast to informal learning or experiential trial-and-error approaches, training programs provide intentional pathways for developing the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors required to navigate complex intercultural interactions. As Aneas (2009) argues, when such training is implemented systematically, professionals become better equipped to interpret cultural challenges, adapt communication strategies, and engage with multicultural teams in more context-sensitive ways.

A consistent theme in the literature is that effective intercultural training must address the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of intercultural competence simultaneously. These dimensions reflect the intellectual understanding of cultural differences, the emotional and attitudinal readiness to engage with diversity, and the practical ability to behave appropriately across cultural contexts (Deardorff, 2006; Aneas, 2009). Their interdependence requires learning experiences that are iterative rather than episodic, reflective rather than prescriptive, and integrated into daily professional routines (Arthur, 2001; De Santos, 2004; Sierra-Huedo, 2018). Moreover, as Earley (2002) notes, competence development is unlikely to achieve long-term impact without personal motivation and a genuine willingness to engage with cultural complexity. Training must therefore not only teach skills but also foster dispositions such as curiosity, openness, and intercultural sensitivity.

In practice, however, the implementation of intercultural training remains uneven, particularly within Spanish SMEs. While multinational corporations have increasingly incorporated intercultural development into their strategic human resource policies, smaller organizations often rely on informal learning processes or assume that international exposure alone is sufficient preparation for intercultural work (Aneas, 2009; Elboj Saso et al., 2017). This disconnect is partly attributable to conceptual ambiguity. As Elboj Saso et al. (2017) observe, many organizations lack a clear, operational definition of intercultural competence, which makes it difficult to design coherent training initiatives or evaluate their outcomes. Carballal-Broome and Pinillos (2020) highlight an additional structural challenge: the persistent belief that globalization has homogenized professional practices, leading managers to underestimate the significance of cultural differences. This misconception often results in generic or outdated training programs that fail to address the complexities of intercultural work in contemporary organizations.

Despite these constraints, the demand for systematic intercultural training is steadily increasing. Recent business surveys reveal that a majority of Spanish leaders view linguistic and cultural differences as significant barriers to international expansion, prompting a surge in requests for tailored intercultural training programs (El Economista, 2022). This emerging awareness demonstrates a growing recognition that cultural competence is not an optional soft skill, but a strategic capability that supports competitive advantage, operational efficiency, and the sustainability of international partnerships.

Scholars emphasize that intercultural training must be theoretically grounded and contextually adapted to be effective. Aneas (2010) cautions against superficial, stereotype-based approaches that reduce culture to national traits or etiquette rules. Instead, training programs should draw on robust intercultural communication theories and developmental models of competence while being tailored to the learners' professional experiences, sector-specific challenges, and cultural contexts. Experiential methodologies, such as simulations, role-plays, case studies, and critical incident analysis, have been shown to enhance practical understanding and facilitate skill transfer to real-world situations (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994; Cushner, 1989). Sierra-Huedo (2018) further underscores the importance of calibrating training to participants' initial competence levels, noting that individuals develop intercultural competence at different paces depending on their prior exposure, motivation, and access to training opportunities.

The Transversal Intercultural Competence model proposed by Aneas (2003) offers a valuable framework for designing training content. It distinguishes between two macro-competencies, diagnosing and responding, that enable professionals to identify cultural dimensions within interpersonal or organizational dynamics and to act appropriately by integrating cognitive, affective, and behavioral resources. This dual focus helps structure training around both analytical and practical capacities, ensuring that learners develop not only awareness but also actionable skills.

Leadership engagement emerges as a critical factor in determining the effectiveness of intercultural training initiatives. As Aneas (2010) notes, programs that exclude managers often fail to produce lasting organizational change because the reinforcement mechanisms necessary for sustaining new behaviors are absent. Leaders who model intercultural competence, embed it into organizational practices, and support ongoing learning are more likely to cultivate inclusive workplace cultures in which training outcomes can be internalized. Without such leadership involvement, training risks becoming an isolated intervention rather than a transformative organizational process.

In sum, the literature highlights clear principles for designing and implementing intercultural training: it must be multidimensional, theoretically informed, experiential, and tailored to specific organizational realities. Yet, in practice, particularly within sectors like international education, training often remains fragmented, reactive, or disconnected from institutional strategies. This persistent gap between academic recommendations and organizational practice underscores the need to investigate how intercultural competence is currently understood, developed, and supported within SMEs, and to explore the conditions under which training can become a meaningful driver of organizational learning and effectiveness.

### 3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how intercultural competence is understood, developed, and fostered through training processes within organizational contexts. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for examining intercultural phenomena, as it allows for the detailed exploration of meanings, interpretations, and social practices that cannot be captured through quantitative measures alone. Given the study's interest in workplace dynamics, lived experiences, and culturally mediated interactions, qualitative inquiry provides the analytical depth needed to illuminate the complexities of intercultural competence in situ.

A case study methodology was selected due to its suitability for investigating complex social processes embedded within real-life organizational settings (Creswell, 2009; Yin, 1994). More specifically, an instrumental case study design (Stake, 1995) was employed. Rather than focusing solely on the uniqueness of the organization, the aim of the instrumental case is to illuminate broader theoretical questions about how intercultural competence emerges and operates within SMEs engaged in international education. The chosen case, Newlink Education, a Spanish SME with more than twenty-five years of experience in mobility and language immersion programs, offers a rich environment for such inquiry. Its continuous engagement with multicultural teams, international partners, and diverse stakeholders provides fertile ground for examining how intercultural challenges are interpreted and managed in everyday professional practice.

The study is grounded in a constructivist epistemology, which holds that knowledge is co-constructed through social interaction, interpretation, and lived experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This epistemological stance aligns with the premise that intercultural competence is not a fixed attribute but an evolving construct shaped by contextual, relational, and organizational factors. It also informed the choice of methods, privileging approaches that capture participants' voices, situated practices, and shared meanings.

#### 3.1. Research Objective

To analyze the role of intercultural communication in the daily operations of multicultural organizational contexts, with the ultimate aim of informing the development of effective training strategies that enhance intercultural competence and contribute to organizational success.

#### 3.2. Data Collection Techniques

Fieldwork took place over a nine-month period at Newlink Education's headquarters in Huesca (Aragón, Spain). To ensure analytic depth and enhance the trustworthiness of findings, the study employed methodological triangulation through three complementary techniques: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups.

Participant Observation spanned from March to December 2022 and was conducted by the researcher, who had longstanding professional experience within the organization. Observation focused primarily on the international education team, whose members interact daily with culturally diverse partners and clients. A structured field diary and observation templates were used to document communication patterns, leadership practices, conflict-resolution strategies, and manifestations of intercultural competence, or its absence. The open and non-intrusive nature of the observations allowed

participants to engage naturally in their routines, thereby offering insight into implicit norms, unspoken assumptions, and recurrent intercultural challenges (Schensul, S.L.; Schensul, J.J. & Le Compte, 1999; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Given the researcher's insider background, particular care was taken to document reflexive notes and distinguish between observed phenomena and pre-existing professional knowledge.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of the organization occupying both managerial and operational roles. Interviews explored personal experiences with intercultural communication, perceptions of leadership practices, and views on training needs. The semi-structured format allowed for consistency across interviews while giving participants space to elaborate on issues that emerged organically (Kvale, 1996). This flexibility was critical for capturing the nuanced ways professionals make sense of intercultural dynamics.

Focus groups complemented the individual interviews by facilitating collective reflection. Three sessions were conducted: one with team leaders, one with non-managerial staff from Newlink Education, and a third with external experts in intercultural communication and international education. These discussions enabled the identification of shared challenges, divergent perspectives, and collective sense-making practices. They also served as a preliminary validation mechanism, allowing the researcher to cross-check emerging themes and deepen understanding of the organizational context.

### 3.3. Participant Selection And Sampling Strategy

Participants were recruited through purposive and criterion-based sampling (Patton, 2002). The inclusion criteria ensured that all participants (a) possessed at least two years of professional experience in the international education sector, (b) occupied roles requiring frequent intercultural communication, and (c) provided informed consent. This sampling strategy prioritizes information-rich cases capable of contributing to theoretical insight, rather than statistical representativeness. The approach aligns with theoretical sampling principles (Eisenhardt, 1989; Martínez, 2006), which emphasize the selection of participants who can illuminate conceptual constructs of interest, such as intercultural competence, leadership, and training practices. The final qualitative sample encompassed a diverse mix of roles, hierarchical levels, and perspectives, strengthening the credibility and transferability of the findings. Participants' identities were anonymized using alphanumeric codes to ensure confidentiality and ethical integrity throughout the research process.

**Table 1:** Qualitative sample

Data Collection Technique	Sample	Detailed Information
Participant Observation	64 observation records	Compiled during the 9-month period of participant observation within the international education department at Newlink Education.
Semi-Structured Interviews	11 interviewees	Comprising 3 senior managers and 2 middle managers from Newlink Education; 2 directors from other Spanish SMEs affiliated with ASEPROCE; and 5 international providers based in the US, Canada, Ireland, and the UK.
Focus Groups	15 participants	Distributed across two internal groups (staff members and team leaders from Newlink) and one external group of experts in intercultural communication and international education.

Source: Authors' own elaboration

This diversity of roles, organizational affiliations, and cultural backgrounds enabled a rich, comparative analysis of how intercultural challenges, leadership dynamics, and training needs are experienced and addressed at multiple levels within the industry.

### 3.4. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical principles for social research, particularly the principle of *do no harm* (Berg, 2009) and the principle of beneficence (Beauchamp & Childress, 2012), ensuring that potential risks to participants were minimized and outweighed by the relevance and potential benefits of the research<sup>2</sup>. All participants were fully informed about the study's purpose and procedures, and voluntary participation was secured through written informed consent. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed throughout, and data collection was conducted with transparency and respect for participants' rights and well-being. To protect identities, each participant was assigned an alphanumeric code based on their role, method of participation, and sequence. For example, *DIR(I)1*<sup>3</sup> refers to a member of the executive team interviewed individually, while *GES(F)2*<sup>4</sup> refers to a member of the international education team who participated in a focus group. These codes are used consistently in the Findings section to attribute quotations while maintaining confidentiality.

## 4. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an inductive thematic approach, consistent with the constructivist orientation of the study and its aim of generating meaning from participants' lived experiences. All interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim (Poland, 1995), and the full corpus of data, including transcripts, field diary entries, structured observation templates, and relevant organizational documents, was read repeatedly to ensure deep familiarization. This immersion phase enabled the identification of preliminary patterns and sensitizing concepts grounded in the everyday realities of intercultural work.

<sup>2</sup> Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Vic (approval code: 200/2022), prior to the start of fieldwork.

<sup>3</sup> "DIR" stands for "Director"; "I" stands for "interview" and 1 refers to the number assigned to the participant.

<sup>4</sup> "GES" stands for "Gestión" in Spanish. It refers to non-managerial positions within the international education department. "F" corresponds to "Focus Group" and 2 refers to the number assigned to the participant.

The coding process began with open coding, through which meaningful units of text were labelled without imposing preconceived categories. These codes were progressively refined into broader conceptual groupings, and iterative comparisons were conducted across data sources to strengthen interpretive consistency (Easterby-Smith, 1991; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Coding trees were drafted, contrasted, and consolidated into a single analytical structure, which served as the basis for both descriptive analysis, mapping what participants reported, and interpretive analysis, understanding how these accounts reflected deeper intercultural dynamics within the organization.

Throughout the analytic process, the researcher integrated reflexive notes to mitigate potential biases stemming from their prior professional role in the organization. Triangulation across methods (observation, interviews, and focus groups) further enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings by allowing convergence and divergence in the data to be systematically examined.

For the purposes of this article, and aligned with the research objectives, the full set of categories was synthesized into two overarching thematic areas: (1) intercultural communication and professional relationships, and (2) the development of intercultural competence through organizational training. These themes reflect recurring patterns in how participants perceive, interpret, and navigate intercultural interactions within Spanish SMEs operating in international education. The following sections present these findings and explore the implications of the intercultural dynamics identified.

#### 4.1. Intercultural Communication And Professional Relationships

This section examines how intercultural communication shapes professional relationships in the international education sector. It responds to two guiding questions: (1) how the cultural component influences agreements and negotiation processes in business contexts, and (2) what role intercultural communication plays in leadership and negotiation practices within culturally diverse settings. The findings reveal a consistent recognition of culture as a significant factor in professional interactions, while also highlighting gaps in conceptual understanding and organizational preparedness.

##### 4.1.1. The Cultural Component In The Business Context And Familiarity With The Concepts Of Intercultural Communication And Competence

This subsection explores how cultural factors shape business negotiations and how familiar professionals are with the concepts of intercultural communication and intercultural competence. Interviews with members of the management team revealed general awareness of cultural dynamics but an imprecise and superficial understanding of key terms. One director acknowledged: “Yes, I’m familiar with it [the term intercultural competence], although it’s not a term we use frequently” [DIR(I)1]. Another reflected: “I don’t know it in depth, and I lack technical knowledge, but I understand that it involves studies and efforts to bring cultures closer together and understand their differences to improve communication” [DIR(I)2]. And a third shared: “I know what the concept means, and I’d say I’m familiar with it, but I recognize that maybe I lack a deep understanding of what it truly implies” [DIR(I)3]. These responses suggest that even at the leadership level, there is no shared or operational definition of what intercultural communication entails. Familiarity with the term appears to be mostly passive, and the concept is not integrated into daily language or strategic thinking.

This was reinforced by participant observation. Across more than forty internal meetings, the term *intercultural competence* was used explicitly only once (approximately 2.5%). However, expressions such as “empathy,” “beliefs,” “in their culture...,” or “their communication style is...” were frequently employed when referring to culturally sensitive situations. These formulations suggest that while cultural awareness is present in practice, it is not accompanied by a clear or consistent conceptual framework. The absence of terminology was observed across multiple organizational levels, including both managers and directors, indicating that the concepts of intercultural communication and competence are not clearly understood or consciously applied in daily work.

In focus groups with staff in management and leadership roles, participants were asked whether they believed cultural factors affected their negotiations and relationships with international partners. The responses confirmed that cultural dynamics play a significant role in business interactions and highlighted the challenges that arise when such differences are not well understood or appropriately addressed. One director described how a failure to consider cultural differences led to the breakdown of a professional relationship:

*The cultural component is very important and should always be considered in intercultural negotiations [...] It outweighs the conditions or contracts themselves. In one case with a U.S. provider, our CEO stepped in with an authoritarian tone [...] It froze everything. The Americans fell back on the contract, and the relationship ended altogether. [DIR(E)2]*

A similar incident was observed during participant observation. In a complex case involving a student in Canada, the board of directors adopted a firm and inflexible position. While the immediate issue was resolved to the satisfaction of the student and her natural family, the Canadian provider later scaled back their collaboration with the company, clearly dissatisfied with how the situation had been managed. These recurring experiences appear to have contributed to a progressive shift in understanding among some members of the leadership team. While formal training in intercultural competence was not mentioned, some participants described how their awareness evolved through accumulated experience:

*The cultural component plays a fundamental role in a sector like ours. A few years ago, I didn’t see the importance of having staff trained in intercultural skills; I thought having a good level of English was enough. But over time, I realized that knowing the negotiation and work rituals of the other party is what helps build strong and stable professional relationships. [DIR(F)2]*

The data consistently show that while the relevance of the cultural component is widely acknowledged, formal understanding of intercultural communication and competence remains vague. Moreover, the lack of conceptual clarity among leaders also raises concerns about how, or whether, intercultural awareness is (or is not) being transmitted to their teams. Returning to the research questions that guide this section, we can affirm, based on the results obtained, that the cultural component plays a fundamental role in the development of agreements and negotiation processes involving culturally diverse professionals.

#### 4.1.2. Problems, Difficulties, And Failures In Intercultural Business Relationships

This subsection explores recurring challenges encountered in professional relationships involving culturally diverse counterparts, as well as the factors contributing to failed interactions. Focus groups and interviews identified common issues: (a) differing communication styles, (b) varied perceptions of time and urgency, (c) divergent approaches to crisis management, (d) cultural prejudices, (e) difficulties in building trust, (f) differing interpretations of contracts, (g) incompatible work rhythms, and (h) logistical challenges, such as time zone differences. One international education staff member commented:

*I do think there are recurring problems we need to watch out for, although we don't have a protocol, which I think would be ideal to resolve these situations. I believe these issues can be categorized by the stages of our work. Some occur before signing contracts or during product negotiation, while others arise when clients or students are already abroad. And these problems can become more or less complex depending on the country we're working with.* [GES(F)1]

Another director reflected:

*Honestly, I had never stopped to think deeply about this question, maybe due to a lack of time, but I believe it's very important. These incidents especially occur when participants are abroad, and we need to resolve issues outside our borders. In many cases, the problems are cultural: adaptation issues, communication breakdowns, difficulties in fulfilling agreements...* [DIR(F)1]

These types of problems were also observed during participant observation. In over 40 observed team meetings, more than one-third of the incidents discussed were related to the different ways of handling emergencies or interpreting the concept of urgency among all parties involved. Almost one-third were tied to differing communication styles and how messages were interpreted. A slightly smaller proportion involved misunderstandings, often linked to disagreements about verbal or written agreements. The remaining cases were not directly related to intercultural issues and were categorized as general operational challenges. Overall, cultural issues were present in the significant majority of the incidents discussed. Participants also identified particular countries where cultural clashes were more frequent, typically in contexts where the volume of operations was higher.

One director explained:

*We do keep a record of incidents, and we tend to have a higher volume with countries like the United States, Canada, and Germany, followed by the UK and Ireland. We've also had recurring issues when signing contracts or trying to build new relationships with schools in Australia, China, Japan, or South Korea. To resolve these, it's essential to have tact and intercultural skills, so as not to offend our partners or let the situation become entrenched.* [DIR(F)1]

Another member of the team shared a more personal account:

*As a client manager, I often face recurring issues when working with U.S. providers. When there's a problem, they tend to adopt a very direct, sometimes aggressive [sic.], approach. It often feels like they've already made their decision and won't budge. That's frustrating because I feel like I have no negotiating power. Then, when we have to explain the issue to the families of our participants, they don't understand the American point of view, and they take it out on us. I do feel I'm getting better at reading them, but it's tough. The meetings we have as a team really help, where we analyze the situation and suggest negotiation strategies based on our past experiences. We're lucky to have a team leader who really understands how to deal with Americans. She often takes the lead in those negotiations.* [GES(F)2]

This case illustrates cultural differences in communication and negotiation styles between professionals from Spain and the United States. The participant also expresses the pressure they feel in having to relay difficult decisions to Spanish families, knowing these may not be culturally well-received. The sense of frustration and lack of negotiating confidence reflects a broader uncertainty about one's own intercultural skills, especially when mediating between cultures. Team meetings were also mentioned as a useful tool for resolving incidents. These allowed staff to share experiences, analyze cases collaboratively, and learn from one another. This approach was associated with a participatory leadership style, although there were instances where negotiation tasks defaulted to the team leader. This dynamic was confirmed during participant observation, where the team leader intervened directly in a considerable proportion of incident resolutions. A manager described this collaborative process:

*To resolve cultural issues or incidents, one good strategy we use is holding daily meetings where each team member presents their problem and, all together, including our supervisors, we analyze it and propose solutions based on previous experiences. Also, the director of the department, who has extensive knowledge of intercultural matters, regularly organizes short training sessions for the team, covering topics like intercultural communication and international negotiation skills.* [DIR(F)3]

However, later reflections revealed that these short sessions, while appreciated, were not considered sufficient by staff. Several interviewees felt these learning opportunities should be more structured and sustained over time.

Finally, linguistic issues were not identified as a barrier in terms of basic communication (since all informants had at least a C1 level of English), but the way language was used, tone, directness, and nuance, did come up as a source of friction. One director reflected on how their communication style had to evolve depending on the context:

*At the beginning of my career, I found the direct and imperative tone used in Spain very problematic. While I was in Ireland, where communication is much more indirect and cautious, I was perceived as aggressive or bossy. I had to learn to adjust my English to avoid sounding rude. Later, working in the U.S., I had to readapt again. Even though it was the same language, I had to tone down the irony, sarcasm, or double meanings, be more direct, and be cautious with certain sensitive topics.* [DIR(E)2]

Two directors also reflected on the limits of linguistic proficiency alone in international contexts. When asked whether speaking the same language was enough to negotiate with someone from another country, they strongly disagreed:

*I don't agree. We shouldn't confuse 'language' with 'communication' [sic.] And even if we only talked about communication, we'd still fall short. A set of words and grammar rules is empty on its own; it carries no emotional or intentional weight. It's in communication where we find these nuances. Communication also includes tone, body language, and choice of words depending on context[...] Effective communication involves the speaker's social norms, cultural background, and even national history. The same language can be spoken in different ways, even within one country. For instance, I've always been fascinated by how my personality changes when I speak Spanish versus English, my voice, my tone, even my sense of humor." [DIR(E)2]*

*Of course not. I absolutely disagree with that myth. Effective negotiation goes far beyond language. It requires understanding cultural differences, values, norms, communication styles, and ways of doing business. Language may be important, but it's certainly not everything. [DIR(E)3]*

The data show that intercultural business relationships are frequently challenged by differences in communication styles, cultural assumptions, and expectations around urgency, contracts, and conflict resolution. Although participants have developed informal strategies to manage these situations, such as collaborative meetings and experiential learning, many continue to experience insecurity or frustration, particularly in high-stakes negotiations. While language proficiency is not seen as a major barrier, the nuances of communication and cultural style are consistently highlighted as key factors in both successful and failed interactions.

Viewed together, the eight issues observed align with four recurrent dynamics, (1) meaning negotiation (Hall, 1976, 1990); (2) temporal coordination (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997); (3) role/authority and agreement interpretation (House et al., 2004); and (4) capability building for intercultural work, patterns also observed in Spanish multicultural teams (Pérez Cañado & Méndez García, 2007).

#### 4.2. Developing Intercultural Competence Through Organizational Training

This section aims to answer the following question: *What type of intercultural training do professionals currently receive, and what training should be implemented to effectively develop intercultural competence in multicultural organizational contexts?*

Findings from interviews, focus groups, and participant observation at Newlink Education reveal that most professionals develop intercultural skills informally, primarily through “on-the-job” experience, repeated exposure to culturally complex situations, and reactive problem-solving. Participants described this process as instinctive, sometimes chaotic, and often unsupported by formal systems or protocols. Metaphors such as “learning the hard way” and “being thrown into the deep end” were frequently used to describe this experience:

*In our case, we indeed improve our skills day by day because we're on the front line. But we really need more training and action protocols, depending on the countries we work with. Honestly, sometimes we learn through hard knocks. [GES(F)4].*

*I think in this job we learn by doing. The incidents that arise, and with whom, eventually get resolved and become real cultural lessons. That said, I agree with [GES(F)4], we often dive in without knowing how to swim. If we had more training or country-specific protocols [...] we could perform better and build stronger, more positive relationships with our partners. [GES(F)1]*

These reflections were supported by participant observation: newer employees gradually became more effective at handling intercultural incidents. Yet, this learning process was described as inefficient and often emotionally taxing. Professionals expressed a strong desire for structured, proactive learning interventions that could complement experience and reduce the margin for error. Some team leaders were praised for taking the initiative to offer informal training to their teams, brief internal sessions on communication styles, or cultural frameworks. However, such initiatives were often constrained by time and dependent on individual will, rather than being embedded in the company's training strategy:

*What I received came from my manager, who knows a lot about this and ran internal sessions. But I would have liked it to be more regular and long-term. She did what she could when she had time, but in this sector, calm moments are rare. [GES(F)1]*

These insights suggest that training efforts, when they occur, are typically *ad hoc* and not part of a coherent or strategic HR plan. One director addressed this issue directly, stating:

*First, we need to be aware that interculturality is real in this sector [...] we're still too focused on our own culture to understand that adaptation is necessary [...] I think training should be offered to all new team members, something I try to promote during hiring, although it's not part of the official onboarding [...] Teams should periodically receive training on what interculturality is, what to look out for, signals of possible misunderstandings, and emotional intelligence. These could be a starting point. Later, we could introduce culture-specific training and mediation skills. [DIR(E)2]*

Observation confirmed that while some training initiatives, referred to as “training capsules,” were offered and well-received, they were rare and not sustained over time. This further underlines the need to move from sporadic, reactive interventions to a more strategic, long-term approach to competence development.

Experienced professionals also shared how their intercultural skills had developed over the years through long-term exposure, international mobility, and the accumulation of informal knowledge. However, many acknowledged that formal training could have accelerated their growth and better prepared them to lead their teams. Despite this shared recognition, a recurring barrier mentioned across roles was the lack of time. Even leaders committed to staff development noted that time constraints made it difficult to plan and deliver regular training. This creates a vicious cycle: a lack of training leads to misunderstandings, conflicts, and other operational inefficiencies, which further consume the organization's already limited time and resources, making it harder to implement the necessary training that could resolve these issues.

In conclusion, the findings clearly illustrate that training for the development of intercultural competence is not just beneficial; it is essential for success in international collaboration. When organizations rely exclusively on experiential learning, they expose their teams to avoidable stress and inconsistent professional development. Integrating intercultural training into recruitment, onboarding, and ongoing professional development practices, particularly as a formalized component of human resources (HR) strategy, is a necessary condition for building culturally competent teams.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Intercultural Communication And Relationships In Practice

The findings reveal that insufficient intercultural competence across all levels of the organization, especially within leadership, creates fertile ground for misunderstandings, conflict, and weakened professional relationships. Challenges such as divergent perceptions of time, contrasting communication styles, differing approaches to conflict resolution, and difficulties in building trust arise not as isolated incidents but as systemic patterns embedded in daily operations. When these gaps appear at the managerial level, the consequences become more pronounced: negotiations are jeopardized, partnerships deteriorate, and the organization's reputation is put at risk.

These patterns closely align with established theoretical frameworks on cultural variability. Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 2001, 2004), Hall's theories of communication and time (1976, 1990), and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner's (1997) cultural dimensions help explain why intercultural tensions emerge and why they repeatedly follow similar trajectories. For example, divergences in time orientation, visible in disagreements about deadlines, urgency, and decision-making pace, correspond to cultural differences in long-term orientation (LTO) and time conceptualization. Countries such as the United States, Canada, and Australia, which show lower LTO values, tend to prioritize short-term results and rapid outcomes. In contrast, cultures with higher LTO scores emphasize careful planning, future returns, and relational continuity. Spain occupies an intermediate position, which partially explains why Spanish professionals sometimes struggle to reconcile immediate operational pressures with a desire to preserve harmonious long-term partnerships.

These tensions are also consistent with Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner's distinction between sequential and synchronic time orientations. Sequential cultures (e.g., U.S., U.K.) conceptualize time as linear, emphasizing punctuality, clear scheduling, and strict adherence to plans. Synchronic cultures like Spain adopt a more flexible, relational understanding of time, allowing tasks to run concurrently and adapting timetables based on interpersonal dynamics. Such differences can create friction in international education programs, where coordination across multiple actors requires both efficiency and relational sensitivity.

Another recurrent source of conflict is uncertainty avoidance. Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance index (UAI) positions Spain among the countries with higher avoidance, relying heavily on detailed procedures, careful planning, and risk mitigation (Hofstede, 2001, 2004). In contrast, the U.S. and Canada demonstrate lower avoidance, favoring proactive decision-making, improvisation, and comfort with ambiguity. When these divergent preferences intersect in high-stakes situations, such as disciplinary cases or program incidents, misunderstandings are likely to escalate. One illustrative example from the study involves a disciplinary decision made by a U.S. partner, who enforced a code-of-conduct violation by immediately expelling a student. This action reflected a universalist, rule-driven perspective. The Spanish partner, guided by particularist norms and a high-context communication style, attempted to renegotiate the outcome due to reputational and relational concerns. The American provider's refusal to back down exemplifies a classic clash between universalist and particularist orientations: one grounded in rules and consistency, the other in relationships and context.

Communication style differences also play a central role in these challenges. Although linguistic proficiency was uniformly high among staff, language use, tone, directness, implicitness, humor, and emotional expression frequently led to misinterpretations. Hall's (1976) distinction between high- and low-context communication provides a valuable interpretive lens: low-context cultures prioritize clarity, explicitness, and legalistic precision, whereas high-context cultures rely on relational cues, indirectness, and shared understandings. Neutral versus emotional cultural orientations (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997) provide additional nuance. While Spanish professionals may perceive emotional expressiveness as a sign of sincerity, professionals from neutral cultures may interpret the same behavior as unprofessional or confrontational. These differing expectations about appropriate emotional expression can easily lead to discomfort, frustration, or assumptions of disrespect.

The findings also show that the concepts of intercultural communication and intercultural competence are not widely understood within the organization. Although leaders recognized the practical relevance of cultural awareness, they lacked the vocabulary and theoretical frameworks that would allow them to articulate, share, and apply this knowledge systematically. This reflects broader challenges identified in the literature, particularly the difficulty organizations face in operationalizing intercultural competence beyond general notions of "cultural sensitivity" or "good communication" (Elboj Saso et al., 2017; Carballal-Broome & Pinillos, 2020). The absence of shared conceptual clarity weakens an organization's ability to institutionalize best practices, develop tailored training, or evaluate intercultural performance.

Viewed collectively, these findings highlight the need for organizations, especially SMEs operating in international education, to move beyond intuitive, experience-based approaches and toward structured, theoretically grounded strategies for developing intercultural competence. The next section draws on these insights to identify concrete pathways for strengthening intercultural training and fostering more resilient, culturally responsive organizational practices.

**Table 2:** Strategies for fostering IC in intercultural business settings

No	Strategy	Description
1	Awareness, Self-Knowledge, and Training	Organizations must build awareness of intercultural dynamics and invest in targeted training. Professionals need to recognize their own cultural frameworks and biases before effectively engaging with others.

No	Strategy	Description
2	Effective Intercultural Communication	Training should emphasize message clarity, tone adaptation, and active listening to minimize misinterpretations and foster trust.
3	Adaptation and Flexibility	Professionals must learn to adjust communication and negotiation strategies to align with their counterparts' cultural expectations, even in high-pressure situations.
4	Development of Protocols	Case-specific protocols for recurring issues in cross-cultural interactions can provide valuable guidance and facilitate conflict resolution, especially for less experienced team members.
5	Collaborative Conflict Resolution	Regular team meetings dedicated to analyzing cultural incidents and jointly devising solutions have proven highly effective, providing opportunities for reflection, shared learning, and informal development of intercultural skills.

Source: Authors' own elaboration

## 5.2. Training Needs For Developing Intercultural Competence

This section explores the challenges encountered in intercultural business relations and the pressing need to strengthen intercultural competence among both leaders and teams. These insights have laid the foundation for designing a tailored training proposal aimed at equipping SMEs to build and maintain successful intercultural relationships.

The findings of this study underscore that intercultural challenges in SMEs are not merely operational but structural, stemming from limited intercultural competence at both managerial and staff levels. Misunderstandings related to communication norms, time orientation, interpersonal expectations, and conflict resolution reveal a clear need for systematic and sustained training. While professionals demonstrated growing awareness through experience, the absence of formal processes or shared frameworks resulted in inconsistent practice, avoidable tensions, and uneven development across the organization.

Developing intercultural competence requires more than learning facts about other cultures. The literature emphasizes that it begins with personal transformation, specifically, the ability to reflect on one's cultural identity, examine deeply held beliefs, and recognize how emotions influence perception and behavior (Kim, 1989; Rodrigo, 1999; Donoso, Rodríguez, Aneas, De Santos & Curós, 2009). Donoso et al. (2009) highlight that effective training combines cognitive understanding with emotional awareness and practical skills for managing intercultural encounters. This aligns with Aneas's Intercultural Transversal Competence Model (2003, 2009), which distinguishes three interconnected dimensions: affective (how individuals feel), cognitive (what they know), and behavioral (how they act). Training must therefore target all three dimensions simultaneously to support balanced competence development.

Drawing on the empirical findings and existing theory, the study identifies several essential elements for designing effective intercultural training. These elements reflect recurring developmental needs expressed by staff, including: greater awareness of different communication styles, enhanced capacity to interpret non-verbal cues, improved strategies for negotiation across cultural boundaries, and clearer protocols for managing conflict with international partners. These insights parallel Adler and Bartholomew's (1992) global leadership competencies, which emphasize the capacity to interpret diverse value systems, collaborate across cultures, and adapt behavior flexibly in unfamiliar settings.

Together, these findings establish an evidence-based foundation for designing a tailored training program suited to the realities of SMEs in the international education sector.

**Table 3:** Key elements for effective intercultural training

No	Knowledge Area	Description
1	Society, Religion, and Culture	Understanding the relationships between culture, religion, and human behavior, including identity, ethnocentrism, and cultural relativism.
2	Globalization, Cultural Diversity, and Organizational Structures	Examining global migration, its societal and organizational impacts, and how organizations operate across cultural contexts.
3	Intercultural Communication	Core principles, cultural clusters, high- and low-context cultures, and intercultural communication strategies.
4	Intercultural Negotiation	Developing negotiation skills adapted to diverse cultural contexts, including business rituals, meeting preparation, and awareness of diverse interaction styles.
5	Leadership and Multicultural Team Management	Leadership tools for multicultural teams, focusing on the characteristics of effective intercultural leaders and teamwork skills.
6	Intercultural Mediation and Conflict Resolution	Strategies for fostering social cohesion and resolving intercultural conflicts.

Source: Authors' own elaboration

## 5.3. Training Proposal

Building on the identified needs, this study proposes a comprehensive intercultural training program specifically designed for SMEs operating in international education. Consistent with Aneas's (2010) recommendations, the program emphasizes practical, context-sensitive learning that directly addresses the challenges documented in the field, particularly communication breakdowns, conflict-resolution difficulties, and misunderstandings grounded in cultural differences. The training systematically integrates the cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral dimensions of intercultural competence.

The program is designed for all staff engaged in international operations, with content adapted for both managerial and non-managerial employees. It consists of six core modules, with Module 4 (Leadership and Team Management) delivered in two versions to reflect the differing responsibilities and expectations of each group. The pedagogical approach is grounded in

collaborative learning and problem-based learning (PBL), encouraging critical thinking, teamwork, and active engagement. Training activities draw on real cases from the sector, ensuring high relevance and authenticity, and mixed-role working groups simulate the multicultural collaboration patterns common in international education. The structure and content of the program were shaped by a detailed needs analysis conducted during the case study, incorporating input from employees, managers, and external specialists. Participants expressed a strong desire for greater clarity in country-specific communication styles, negotiation expectations, and protocols for managing intercultural incidents. The program responds to these needs through modular content that builds progressively from foundational concepts to advanced skills.

The full program runs for twenty weeks (October to March), aligning with the industry's seasonal workflow. A blended-learning format ensures flexibility and cost-effectiveness. Asynchronous components, hosted on a platform such as Moodle, include readings, videos, exercises, and assessments that participants can complete at their own pace. Synchronous sessions, delivered either in person or via livestream, combine theoretical explanations with experiential methods such as case studies, simulations, role-plays, and guided group discussions. International partners are invited to participate in sessions where their cultural and operational perspectives are most relevant, enriching the authenticity of the training and strengthening professional relationships. A defining feature of the program is the co-creation of learning materials with international partners. This collaborative approach ensures that scenarios, case studies, and reflective tasks are grounded in real intercultural encounters and reflect the complexities of cross-border collaboration. Such co-created content also enhances mutual understanding among partners and supports relationship-building across cultural divides.

The program concludes with the development of a personalized action plan, enabling participants to apply what they have learned to their professional responsibilities. Optional coaching sessions offer further support for those who wish to deepen specific dimensions of their competence. For a select group of participants, the program also includes the possibility of a short international stay, designed to strengthen cultural understanding and reinforce relationships with partner organizations. These stays have been well-received in the past and are often facilitated at low cost through reciprocal arrangements. Therefore, the proposed training program addresses the specific needs of Spanish SMEs in the international education sector by integrating theory-based content with practical, context-sensitive learning experiences. While tailored to this particular industry, the program's structure, pedagogical approach, and modular design make it adaptable to other SMEs working in global contexts. It offers a sustainable pathway for organizations seeking to strengthen intercultural competence, improve operational effectiveness, and maintain strong and equitable international partnerships.

### 5.3.2. Training Program Overview

The proposed training program has been designed as a comprehensive, blended-learning initiative aimed at strengthening intercultural competence across SMEs operating in the international education sector. It comprises a total of 75 hours of instruction, combining 40 hours of synchronous sessions with 35 hours of asynchronous learning. The program is delivered over 20 weeks, from October to March, allowing it to adapt to the seasonal rhythms of the sector. Its target audience includes professionals working in international education, with a particular focus on SMEs in Spain.

The program is structured around six core learning objectives. First, it seeks to raise awareness of the relevance of intercultural competence in professional practice. Second, it aims to develop effective intercultural communication skills. Third, it supports the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes associated with intercultural competence. Fourth, it focuses on enhancing negotiation capabilities across culturally diverse contexts. Fifth, it fosters intercultural leadership and team management. Finally, it equips professionals with mediation strategies to address and resolve conflicts arising in multicultural environments. The 6 interconnected modules form the core of the program. The first module offers foundational training in intercultural communication and competence, introducing key concepts such as culture, interculturality, communication styles, and cultural self-awareness. Participants complete an initial diagnostic assessment, informed by the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), alongside reflective exercises that help them articulate their own cultural identities and assumptions.

The 2nd module concentrates on the practical application of intercultural communication theories. Drawing on frameworks developed by Hall (1976; 1990), Hofstede (1980; 2001), Hofstede and Hofstede (2004), Meyer (2016), Ting-Toomey and Darjee (2018), Bennett (2015), and Dearnorff (2006; 2009), participants analyze real incidents, examine successful cases of intercultural interaction, and engage in simulations, including role plays with international partners, designed to support the transfer of theoretical insight into practical competence. The third module focuses on negotiation in intercultural business contexts. It examines negotiation styles, culturally shaped expectations, and the factors that often contribute to negotiation failures. Participants engage with authentic scenarios involving product negotiations, pricing discussions, and conflict-resolution processes, enabling them to refine strategies and identify adaptive approaches in culturally complex interactions.

Module 4 addresses intercultural leadership and team management. Drawing on the GLOBE project and related scholarship, this module examines culturally diverse leadership expectations, decision-making processes, and feedback practices. Two versions of the module are offered, one for managers and another for non-managerial staff, to ensure that activities such as role plays, group exercises, and leadership case studies are aligned with participants' responsibilities. The 5th module provides training in intercultural mediation and conflict resolution. Participants develop country-specific protocols, collaborate on real incidents drawn from the sector, design action plans, and present their proposals to management. This component is intentionally action-oriented, encouraging participants to apply their new skills directly to operational challenges. The final module centres on application, evaluation, and consolidation. Participants complete a closing diagnostic assessment, compare it with their initial results, and prepare a personal action plan recorded in their learning journals. Optional individual coaching sessions are offered to provide personalised feedback and deepen reflective practice. The module also incorporates participant and organizational feedback surveys, which help identify strengths in the program and areas for refinement.

A distinctive feature of the program is the possibility of including a short international immersion experience. Suggested by experts consulted during the study, this component is intended to provide participants with meaningful opportunities for applied learning in countries where their organizations regularly collaborate. Participants may attend language courses offered by partner institutions, observe program operations, and participate in meetings with local teams. Managers interviewed during the study noted that such initiatives have been used successfully in the past, are economically feasible, and have a demonstrable positive impact on communication, trust, and partnership quality. However, implementation depends on timing, preferably

outside the high-season months, and individual circumstances, meaning not all employees can take part. To support long-term development, the program includes three follow-up sessions scheduled between April and October, depending on organizational needs. These sessions are intended to monitor progress, address new challenges, and maintain focus on intercultural competence development. Ideally, the program would be repeated periodically, particularly during onboarding cycles, to ensure consistency across teams and support sustained organizational learning. Finally, satisfaction and impact surveys are administered to both participants and managerial staff. These evaluations assess the quality, relevance, and effectiveness of the program's content and methodology. Feedback is used to refine the program and adapt it to the evolving needs of SMEs and the international education sector more broadly.

## 5. Limitations And Future Research

Like all case studies, this research is shaped by the characteristics and boundaries of its context. Because the study focuses exclusively on a single Spanish SME operating in the international education sector, the findings cannot be generalized across different cultural or organizational environments. Future research would benefit from comparative, cross-national studies that examine how intercultural competence is interpreted and enacted in similar organizations in other countries. Such comparative work would allow scholars to identify convergences and divergences across cultural contexts and contribute to the development of training models that are adaptable to diverse organizational realities.

Another important avenue for future research concerns the assessment of intercultural competence itself. Although this study highlights the need for structured training, it does not provide a comprehensive evaluation framework for measuring competence development over time. Action research, following Lewin's (1946) cycle of planning, action, and reflection, could offer a useful methodology for testing and refining the proposed training model in real organizational contexts. At the same time, further research is needed to develop and validate reliable, context-specific tools for evaluating intercultural competence within the international education sector. Such tools would allow organizations to monitor progress, assess the impact of training interventions, and tailor programs to the evolving needs of their staff.

Finally, while this study offers an in-depth understanding of intercultural challenges in one organizational context, several areas remain insufficiently explored. Issues such as the long-term impact of experiential learning, the role of organizational culture in shaping intercultural practices, and the influence of digital communication on intercultural interactions deserve further investigation. Addressing these gaps would deepen our understanding of intercultural competence and support the creation of more effective and sustainable development strategies. The findings presented here are intended not as definitive conclusions but as a foundation and inspiration for scholars and practitioners committed to advancing intercultural effectiveness in organizational settings.

## 6. Conclusions

The findings of this study suggest that cultural differences play a significant role in shaping the quality of professional relationships and the success of international collaborations within the international education sector. Through qualitative fieldwork conducted in a Spanish SME, it became clear that misunderstandings and tensions frequently arise from divergent communication styles, perceptions of time and urgency, expectations surrounding relationships, and contrasting approaches to conflict resolution. These are not isolated incidents but recurring patterns that affect day-to-day operations and long-term partnerships alike.

Although many professionals recognized the importance of navigating cultural differences effectively, there was limited clarity regarding what intercultural competence actually entails. The term was rarely used spontaneously, with participants instead referring to general notions such as "soft skills" or "international experience." This imprecision reflects a wider challenge: without a shared understanding of intercultural competence, organizations struggle to design coherent strategies for developing it. As a result, intercultural challenges tend to be managed in ad hoc and reactive ways, relying heavily on individual experience rather than structured training or institutional support.

The findings also highlight a critical leadership dimension. Managers often expressed familiarity with the concept of intercultural communication but had not fully internalized its implications or integrated it into daily practice. Given that employees look to leadership for guidance during intercultural tensions, this gap contributes to inconsistent practices and, at times, unresolved conflict. Moreover, reliance on experiential learning, while valuable, proved to be slow, emotionally demanding, and insufficient to prevent repeated issues, especially for staff in high-stakes negotiation or crisis contexts.

In response to these challenges, the study developed a tailored training proposal for SMEs in the international education sector. The proposed program, grounded in empirical findings and validated by sector leaders and intercultural communication experts, offers a practice-based and context-sensitive approach to competence development. Its flexible blended-learning structure, integration of collaborative and problem-based methodologies, and emphasis on real cases drawn from the sector ensure that the training is relevant, engaging, and implementable. Features such as the involvement of international partners, co-created materials, and the possibility of short international stays further enhance its authenticity and impact.

In conclusion, if Spanish SMEs operating in international education are to build strong and sustainable global partnerships, intercultural competence must be addressed proactively and systematically. The training model proposed in this study offers a meaningful starting point for that process. By embedding intercultural competence into organizational development, recruitment, onboarding, and leadership practices, SMEs can strengthen their operational effectiveness, reduce intercultural tensions, and foster more positive and resilient international collaborations.

**Acknowledgement Statement:** The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to all participants who generously shared their time and insights for this study. We also wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments and constructive feedback, which greatly contributed to the improvement and completion of this manuscript. We are also deeply grateful to Newlink Education for their collaboration and openness during the fieldwork process.

**Conflicts of interest:** The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

**Authors' contribution statements:** Author 1 contributed to the Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Project Administration, Data Curation, and Writing - Original Draft; Author 2 & 3 contributed to Validation and provided critical revisions and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission.

**Funding statements:** As there was no external funding received for this research, the study was conducted without financial support from any funding agency or organization.

**Data availability statement:** Data is available upon request. Please contact the corresponding author for any additional information on data access or usage.

**Disclaimer:** The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect JICC's or editors' official policy or position. All liability for harm done to individuals or property as a result of any ideas, methods, instructions, or products mentioned in the content is expressly disclaimed.

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