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INTERCULTURAL APPROACH IN TEACHING MATERIAL FOR GERMAN BUSINESS PURPOSES

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Abstract

*This study aims to describe the intercultural approach using Byram's (1997) Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) model applied in German Business classes within the Bachelor of German Language and Literature with Honours program at Universiti Putra Malaysia. The research evaluates students' understanding of cultural aspects, norms, and professional practices in Germany within a business context. Data was collected using a questionnaire with a Likert scale. The results indicate that the integration of the intercultural approach into teaching materials received an average **score of 4.0**, suggesting that students demonstrate a solid understanding of cultural differences in business communication between Germany and Malaysia.*

Keywords: *Intercultural, German Teaching, German Business, Intercultural Communicative Competence*

1. INTRODUCTION

The German language has evolved into a widely studied language across the world. Besides being the native language of many European Union citizens, German has transformed into a key asset in the global economic and industrial landscape. As a result, it is spoken by more than 120 million people across 38 countries.

In Southeast Asia, interest in learning German has grown significantly due to the increasing demand for skilled professionals in Germany across various sectors. For instance, the German healthcare industry alone requires approximately 150,000 additional nurses. To meet this demand, Germany has initiated agreements to recruit more healthcare workers from ASEAN countries, particularly Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia.

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According to the Goethe-Institut's website, interest in the German language surged following the COVID-19 pandemic. In Malaysia itself, approximately 15,000 people are currently studying German at formal and non-formal institutions. Moreover, over 700 German companies operate in Malaysia, providing around 65,000 job opportunities. Since the year 2000, Germany has been Malaysia's largest trading partner among EU countries, while Malaysia remains Germany's top trading partner among ASEAN nations.

As Mayer (2000) noted, Germans are increasingly interacting with diverse business cultures, encouraging professionals to develop strong intercultural competencies. The trend highlights the need for a more integrated learning of German, one that extends beyond the linguistic to include professional, social, and cultural. The increased interest in migration to Germany to advance one's career ever more relates to the imperatives of these competencies. Against this background, the usage of teaching material in German Business courses must be intercultural in nature in order to be applicable to professional needs. Among the fundamental approaches to render learning more effective is the intercultural approach, which is learning about German business culture, professional practices, and conventions. This is one of the significant pillars, whereby learners are able to grasp not only spoken and written communication in a business environment but also office etiquette and social conventions essential in Germany.

In Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), German for Business Purposes (BBD3202) is an elective module and offered to third-year students. The module seeks to build business communication competencies, extend business writing skills, and master negotiation skills in German. Among the learning outcomes, students are expected to: (1) Apply business-related vocabulary according to provided communication contexts, (2) Compare German and Malaysian business etiquette, civilization, and values with regard to modern industry practice, and (3) Demonstrate confidence in understanding German business culture and ethics in a curriculum context that is aimed at professional competencies and organizational development.

To solidify their knowledge, fourth-year students are obliged to go through industrial training in various German-related fields. Through this on-the-job training, they are able to be exposed to a German-speaking working environment and apply practically their intercultural knowledge. One of the core skills emphasized in this internship is lifelong learning, which is essential for professional growth. With the presence of numerous German companies in Malaysia—such as Mercedes-Benz, Evonik, Infineon Technologies, and various German language institutes—students are provided with direct opportunities to prepare themselves for real-world employment.

This study aims to ascertain the extent of students' knowledge on how the teaching materials used in class relate to the intercultural method. The teaching materials used provide an overview of industrial workplaces or work environments, particularly those related to culture and how Germans or German companies operate. Students are therefore meant to acquire an excellent understanding of the working environment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Intercultural competence, also known as cross-cultural competence, is one of the teaching approaches that can be applied to enhance German language skills (Baginda et al., 2022).

According to Huber and Reynolds (2014), intercultural competence is a combination of attitudes, knowledge, understanding, and skills applied through action, which enables individuals, either independently or collectively, to: (1) understand and respect people who are perceived to have different cultural affiliations from themselves; (2) respond appropriately, effectively, and respectfully when interacting and communicating with such individuals; (3) establish positive and constructive relationships with them; and (4) develop self-awareness regarding their own multiple cultural affiliations through encounters with cultural differences.

Byram (1997) developed the Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) model, which emphasizes five key dimensions: (1) *Savoir être* (attitude), is openness and curiosity toward other cultures; (2) *savoirs* (knowledge) is the understanding both one's own culture and other cultures; (3) *Savoir comprendre* (interpretation and relation skills), the ability to interpret and understand intercultural interactions; (4) *savoir apprendre/faire* (skills of discovery and interaction), the ability to learn and adapt to different cultural contexts, and; (5) *savoir s'engager* (critical cultural awareness), is critical awareness of cultural issues and the ability to engage effectively in intercultural interactions. This model plays a crucial role in the current context of foreign language learning, particularly in German Business classes, where professional and cultural competencies are increasingly vital. As such, it is essential to develop teaching materials that are not only relevant but also aligned with the demands of the professional industry.

Teaching materials refer to systematically structured content used by both teachers and students in the learning process (Pannen, 1995). According to Malilin (2024), the domain of learning structure examines instructional achievements and student activities in terms of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor learning. It explores students' achievements and performance in a structured manner. Teaching modules serve as a critical component in supporting the teaching and learning process (Kurniawati et al., 2024). Educators have a responsibility to address existing challenges to improve the success of German language learning (Nufadzilah & Sudarmadji, 2022).

Furthermore, Hager (2010) highlights that students are often taught to bridge the gap between their own culture and a new one. However, what is truly necessary is to teach learners how to engage with another culture on its own terms. Similarly, Müller-Hartmann (2000) emphasizes the importance of strong collaborative partnerships between instructors. His research demonstrates that teachers can provide learners with positive intercultural experiences by organizing tasks around the joint reading of literature.

Ware and Kramsch (2005) argue that as students explore language and communication across cultures through technology-mediated interactions, teachers play a crucial role in guiding them toward an intercultural perspective. Lectures can assist students to develop a decentered attitude, one that goes beyond the literal understanding of the surface meaning of the words. Instead, students should be guided to discover the underlying reason of their interlocutors' utterances. The consideration of why individuals speak in a particular way enables students to learn more about their own and other people's cultural background. This reflective task basically develops an intercultural mindset towards language learning, and therefore it is such a crucial component in preparing students for professional and global communication.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive analysis using a Likert scale-based questionnaire to measure students' perceptions of intercultural based teaching material use. The study was conducted on 18 fifth-semester students studying the German for Business Purposes (BBD3202) course. The data collected follows Byram's (1997) Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) model, which consists of five key factors: interpretation & relating, attitude, knowledge, discovery & interaction, and critical awareness. The sampling was conducted via purposive sampling, as these students had already studied the course and were able to provide more relevant data and evaluations.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of the questionnaire, which was structured in alignment with Byram's (1997) Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) model, it can be concluded that the teaching materials used in the Business German class played a significant role in enhancing students' intercultural understanding within an academic and professional learning environment. The questionnaire, which comprised 20 items, was systematically categorized into five core dimensions of ICC: attitude (*savoir être*), knowledge (*savoirs*), interpretation and relation skills (*savoir comprendre*), discovery and interaction skills (*savoir apprendre/faire*), and critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*). These dimensions provided a comprehensive framework for assessing how well the materials supported students in navigating the intercultural elements of business communication.

The survey results showed that most students provided an average rating of 4.0 on a 5-point Likert scale, which signifies a high level of agreement regarding the effectiveness of the materials in helping them recognize and engage with cultural differences, especially between German and Malaysian business norms. This reflects positively on the pedagogical design of the course content, particularly in terms of promoting openness, curiosity, and respect towards the target culture. The materials appear to support not only surface-level linguistic competencies but also the development of deeper intercultural awareness, a skill increasingly valued in international business contexts.

The consistency in students' responses is further evidenced by the relatively low standard deviation (ranging from 0.79 to 0.82), indicating that learners had a generally uniform perception of the teaching materials' value in promoting intercultural competence. This statistical stability suggests that the educational approach adopted in this course was reliably perceived across the cohort, strengthening the argument for its effectiveness and relevance.

Nevertheless, the analysis also highlights areas where improvement is warranted. Although students exhibited confidence in communication and interaction, they appeared to face challenges in cultivating a critical awareness of intercultural subtleties—particularly when it comes to understanding the underlying values, implicit assumptions, and context-specific practices that distinguish German business culture from their own. Such gaps are crucial, as critical cultural awareness is the most advanced stage of intercultural competence and plays a vital role in preparing students for complex, real-world professional interactions.

Therefore, while the current teaching materials have succeeded in fostering fundamental intercultural skills and a positive attitude toward cultural diversity, future enhancements should aim at encouraging students to reflect more deeply on the structural, ethical, and ideological dimensions of intercultural engagement. This could be achieved by integrating more authentic case studies, simulation activities, and reflective assignments that push learners beyond surface-level comparisons and into critical evaluations of cultural practices in professional settings.

Table 1. Statistical Descriptive Questionnaire

Nr	Indicator	Mean	SD
1	Understanding cultural norms	3.93	0.81
2	Interpretation of cultural differences	3.92	0.79
3	Communication skills	3.92	0.80
4	Adaptation to German ethic	3.92	0.81
5	Interactions confidence	3.93	0.82

The data further reveal that students show a high level of interest, an open attitude, and a strong curiosity about German culture, particularly in relation to Germany's work culture. Moreover, they exhibit a good understanding of the cultural differences between Germany and Malaysia, particularly in the contrast between European and Asian cultural norms. However, Malaysia's own multicultural context serves as a preliminary reference for understanding these cultural differences, providing students with an initial perspective on intercultural diversity.

Table 2. Likert scale distribution

Nr	Indicator	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
1	Understanding cultural norms	0.4%	2.8%	30.8%	49.5%	29%
2	Interpretation of cultural differences	0.3%	2.1%	30.5%	50.3%	28.8%
3	Communication skills	0.5%	2.9%	27.27%	43.48%	26.09%
4	Adaptation to German ethic	0%	3%	31.2%	48.5%	29.1%
5	Interactions confidence	0%	3.2%	30.2%	49.8%	29%

Nevertheless, a significant challenge remains—the lack of more specialized teaching materials for business German courses, particularly in Malaysia. So far, the teaching materials used are based on limited references, relying on online modules, YouTube videos, and interactive applications. While these resources enhance students' learning interest and intercultural understanding, they are not sufficient in providing comprehensive and structured learning.

The curriculum design and learning outcomes of the *German for Business Purposes* course place a strong emphasis on exploring and understanding the fundamental cultural differences between Germany and Malaysia. This cultural awareness is viewed as a crucial competency in preparing students for the global job market, especially in cross-border professional settings. The success of the course, however, is not determined solely by the quality of the materials, but by the instructor's ability to master and deliver the content effectively. Instructors play a vital role as cultural mediators who must not only transmit knowledge but also facilitate intercultural understanding and skill-building that are aligned with the learning targets of the curriculum.

In this context, the learning process must go beyond traditional theoretical instruction and integrate practical, real-world tasks that reflect the nature of professional business communication. To this end, the course includes assignments such as writing job application letters, crafting detailed business reports, composing formal emails and CVs, as well as participating in job interview simulations. These hands-on activities not only enhance language proficiency but also equip students with practical workplace skills that are culturally appropriate in both German and Malaysian business contexts. This pragmatic orientation fosters an authentic learning environment where language learning is intertwined with professional expectations.

Teaching is not confined to rigid, static materials. Instructors often draw from a variety of sources—textbooks, professional handbooks, real company documents, and media—to construct a dynamic and communicative approach to language education. This strategy reinforces students' ability to decode and interpret work culture practices, both within German companies operating abroad and within local companies that adopt German business models. By experiencing this diversity of input, learners are encouraged to apply their intercultural knowledge flexibly and contextually.

An example of this applied learning is the inclusion of guest lectures, such as the one from Prym Company, a German-owned enterprise located in Melaka. These sessions offer students a unique opportunity to engage directly with professionals from the German business environment. During such events, students gain valuable insights into organizational structures, management styles, and professional expectations in the German context. They also learn how to align their language skills with industry demands, which adds depth and purpose to their academic learning.

These types of engagements—when combined with structured and systematic teaching materials—offer a highly immersive educational experience. Moreover, interactions with industry professionals and native speakers significantly stimulate not only cognitive development but also students' affective and psychomotor skills. By observing real business practices and participating in reflective discussions, students develop critical thinking, cross-cultural sensitivity, and strategic problem-solving abilities. These competencies are indispensable in preparing them for the Industrial Training (internship) required in the final year of the program.

Ultimately, this multifaceted instructional approach ensures that students are not only linguistically competent but also culturally literate and professionally prepared. As they enter the

workforce, they are better equipped to navigate diverse cultural settings, communicate with confidence, and contribute meaningfully to international business environments.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight the significant role of intercultural communicative competence (ICC)-based teaching materials in enhancing students' understanding of business German. The results indicate that students exhibit a strong openness to cultural differences, particularly between Germany and Malaysia, and demonstrate the ability to interpret and adapt to different linguistic and professional contexts. There is, however, scope for the further development of students' critical awareness of cultural dissimilarities in a professional environment.

Despite the success of the current teaching materials, the lack of specialized content for instructing business German courses in Malaysia remains a challenge. The utilization of online resources, videos, and interactive applications, although beneficial, needs to be complemented with structured and detailed learning modules. In addition, the role of instructors as mediators of intercultural learning is essential in ensuring that students achieve the intended learning goals.

To more effectively equip students for workplace environments, future curriculum development is recommended to include increased experiential learning opportunities, such as direct exposure to industry professionals and native speakers. Practical assignments, such as business communication exercises and job simulations, must be given precedence to bridge the theory-practice divide. By enhancing the structure and depth of intercultural teaching materials, students will be better equipped with and cultural competencies necessary to succeed in international business settings.

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