



Enhancing Intercultural Competence in English for Specific Purposes for Global Integrations

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Abstract

Nowadays, with English having become the dominant language used in all fields, being able to communicate effectively with people from different cultures is a must. ESP courses are offered to students who study in various disciplines at the Agricultural University of Tirana and Faculty of Natural Sciences. Students are required to learn English for employment purposes as well as for academic research. To prepare students for these needs, ESP courses are mandatory for first-year bachelor's degree students across various disciplines. ESP courses provide more than simply teaching the English language. The language teachers prepare students to communicate in English in the subject they are specialized in. These courses are designed to meet the specific needs of students to deal with real situations at work. The Department of Foreign Language contributes by developing books and materials specifically for these classes. However, in addition to linguistic competence, intercultural competence is essential for students to work in multicultural teams and to thrive in a globalized world. Currently, ESP teaching in Albania is mostly focused on linguistic competence, with little attention given to intercultural competence. This is why it is important to combine traditional ESP teaching with intercultural ESP teaching. Intercultural competence is not only important for ESP but also for life in general, as it affects all fields. Therefore, the primary focus of this study will be to suggest methods and strategies for integrating intercultural competence in ESP classes. It is crucial to teach students not only how to communicate but also how to interact effectively in a globalized world. By emphasizing intercultural competence in ESP courses, we can prepare high-quality graduates who can contribute to improving the economic situation of the country.

Keywords: *English for Specific Purposes, curriculum updates, intercultural competence*

1. Introduction

The main aim of this study is to understand to what level is intercultural competence taught in ESP classes and to suggest methods how to integrate intercultural competence. Having language skills and intercultural competence helps individuals communicate and interact effectively with people from different cultures. Living in a globalized world, where misunderstanding may arise due to cultural differences, requires incorporation of different cultural activities and material in the syllabus to help students adapt to different environments. Intercultural competence equips students with the ability to identify and resolve conflicts arising from cultural differences.

Therefore, it is essential to understand that the focus of ESP teaching must incorporate traditional teaching methods and intercultural teaching of ESP. This includes updating the syllabi and textbooks used in ESP classes to incorporate intercultural competence. At the Agricultural University of Tirana and Faculty of Natural Science, intercultural competence is currently not a formal learning or teaching outcome, and this needs to change. Aguilar 2018, highlights the importance of training ESP teachers in methodologies for developing intercultural skills. If teachers are trained on how to incorporate intercultural competence in ESP classes, students will not only improve their linguistic competence but also develop the ability to work effectively in multicultural teams, communicate with individuals from diverse backgrounds, and thrive in a globalized world.

To effectively integrate intercultural competence in ESP classes at the university, it is essential to organize the classes in a way that encourages interaction and dialogue between students and professors. The materials used in class should also facilitate discussion and reflection on both English and Albanian cultures through comparisons and contrasts, to promote the development of intercultural awareness and competence.



2. Literature Background

Why is teaching culture considered to be important? As emphasized by many scholars and researchers, culture holds considerable importance in today's globalized world. According to Kramch (1993) "Culture is a reality that is social, political, and ideological and the difficulty of understanding cultural codes stems from the difficulty of viewing the world from another perspective, not of grasping another lexical or grammatical code". "We are culturally groomed to think and behave in certain ways from the time we are babies" (Brooks, 2004). Culture is important in business English, as Peterson (2004) stated, "If you ignore the importance of culture in international business, you can prepare to consider yourself "out of business"." Peterson (2004) highlights the significance of understanding culture differences when dealing with business. Chaney (2011) stated that "More and more business will involve international activities, which require the ability to communicate across cultures". Culture has been often compared to an iceberg. Just as an iceberg has a visible section above the waterline, and a larger, invisible section below the waterline, so culture has some aspects that are observable and others that can only be suspected, imagined, or intuited. Also, like an iceberg, that part of a culture that is visible (observable behaviour) is only a small part of a much bigger whole (Sorti, 1997). Intercultural competence (IC) is a vital skill set that is necessary for effective communication and cooperation in the global labour market. According to Lantz-Deaton et al. (2020), employers are increasingly seeking candidates with good communication skills to facilitate interaction with individuals from different backgrounds and build trust with foreign clients. In general, employers value intercultural competence skills more than any other skills an employee may possess, as it ensures the efficient functioning of their businesses and companies. Therefore, education should play a crucial role in developing intercultural skills, especially in the context of business and employability. Thus, the term intercultural competence denotes "between cultures". Intercultural competence focuses more on interactions between individuals from various cultures (Lantz. Golubeva, 2020).

An example, U.S. culture encourages people to think creatively and take risks. They are taught to take individual initiative (Peterson, B. 2004). As it is suggested by Peterson (2004), we need to increase student's awareness and how to change their behaviour to be successful. The course should be developed in such a way as to include activities on "how" to make students aware of the culture and prepare them to face real challenges in real life. Dealing with people who have radically different views of the world around them requires cultural intelligence (Christopher Early. P, 2006) Peterson suggested that memorizing a long list of dos and don'ts won't help with important business (Peterson, B. 2004). If we rely on gaining our knowledge solely through ESP books, that knowledge will be incomplete. Certain areas in teaching require more attention, indicating a need to include diverse materials in the classroom. This requires a thoughtful selection of materials, syllabus and course design.

Increasing our understanding of the world and developing critical thinking skills requires a multi-faceted approach. One effective method is to expose ourselves to diverse perspectives and experiences. This can be done by reading literature from different cultures, travelling to different countries, and engaging in conversations with people from diverse backgrounds. By exposing different perspectives, we can expand our understanding of the world and develop critical thinking skills.

The key to achieving success lies in the need to educate students on how to communicate in an explicit and literal manner. Students often struggle to convey their ideas and intentions in written and spoken language. Therefore, it is significant to stress that they bear sole responsibility for how they transmit the message and that any misunderstanding may result in a lack of communication. In this case, professors can assist by teaching students how to avoid complex sentence structures and use easier-to-understand language. Students are going to have different jobs, and we need to prepare them to meet the needs required in today's world, helping them to communicate effectively in a globalized world. As an exemplification, by teaching business English, students will not only receive instructions on how to write reports, emails, and how to describe a product etc., but also become aware of the culture of English-speaking countries. So far, students are not prepared to meet the needs of the business environment, and that's the major reason why businesses fail

3. Integrating Intercultural Competence in English for Specific Purposes

Students need to develop intercultural competence (IC) to effectively communicate and interact with people from different cultural backgrounds. Professors can help students identify and analyse cultural differences that may lead to misunderstandings by incorporating changes in the curricula that



encourage intercultural competence. One way to achieve this is to enrich the syllabus with activities that promote intercultural or global understanding, as Knigh (2004) referred to as "internationalization at home". Integrating intercultural competence in ESP classes can be achieved in various ways. One way is to use extra materials in the class that enable students to compare and reflect on different topics. These materials can include articles, videos, films, and books that expose students to different cultural perspectives and encourage them to critically analyse them. Another approach is to offer different reading activities that promote intercultural awareness. These activities can include reading texts from different cultures, analysing cultural nuances, and discussing cultural differences and similarities. Moreover, participating in programs such as the ERASMUS program can provide students with opportunities to meet and interact with mobile students from different cultural backgrounds. Studying abroad or exchange programs can help develop intercultural competence by providing students with first hand experiences of different cultures. Contact with people of diverse cultural backgrounds or any other form of international experience is considered to be one of the best methods to develop intercultural skills and can help to make a big difference in the building of their career prospects (Latz, Golubeva. 2020). But, based on information available (Aguilar, 2018) less than ten percent of European university students participate in an Erasmus program. This small percentage has prompted universities to find different ways to develop intercultural skills within their own university. Overall, incorporating a range of activities, materials, and programs can enhance intercultural competence in ESP classes, enriching the students' learning experience and preparing them for effective communication and interaction in a globalized world.

4. Methods to Foster Intercultural Competence

Developing intercultural competence is not just about knowing other cultures, but also about developing the skills and attitudes to effectively interact with people from different cultural backgrounds. Bennet (2018) mentioned that "knowledge does not equal competence". This includes being able to navigate cultural differences, communicate effectively, and show respect and empathy towards others.

Studying abroad can certainly be a valuable way to develop intercultural competence, but it is not the only way. Schools can also foster the development of intercultural competence skills by incorporating intercultural activities and discussions into their curricula. This can include things like intercultural workshops, discussions about current events from different cultural perspectives, and activities that encourage students to reflect on their own cultural biases and assumptions.

While it may be challenging for professors to teach intercultural competence, universities need to prioritize this skill in their educational goals. By doing so, they can better prepare their graduates for a globalized world and support the need for intercultural employees in various industries.

Furthermore, students can be taught how to interact with individuals from different cultures, how to engage with the outside world, and how to become more globally minded. With the increasing diversity resulting from globalization, encountering cultural differences in the workplace can lead to a communication breakdown or misinterpretation of situations. This can result in financial losses for businesses, companies, or organizations. Studies have shown that most international projects fail due to a lack of intercultural competency. (Kinast and Thomas, 2010).

To address this issue, it is important to develop strategies that enhance intercultural communication in the workplace. According to the British Council (2013), international communication with clients or business partners overseas has increased. Therefore, individuals must possess intercultural competency skills to succeed in the global marketplace. By fostering IC in students, educators can help prepare them to thrive in diverse settings and contribute positively to a global society. Erwig, K (2022) says "Knowledge and awareness are important building blocks, but an intercultural person must also be able to translate them into performance, which leads to the final component of adaptability". Understanding and being aware of differences are crucial, but it is vital to transform that understanding into practical action, which is considered to be the final step of adaptability.

Cultural differences in the workplace may cause discrimination or may lead even to the breaking of laws, rules etc. P. Christopher Earl Soon Ang, etc. (2006) says "You need cultural intelligence even if you never leave home....Cultural intelligence is essential in facilitating effective cross-cultural adjustment".

5. Methodology

The study involved 134 students from the Agricultural University of Tirana and the Faculty of Natural Science at the University of Tirana. These students completed questionnaire designed based on existing literature like Sercu,L (2005).The data collected are analysed to make recommendations for



further inclusion of intercultural competence in ESP courses. The study aims to suggest different activities that can be implemented in ESP classes and how to direct students towards intercultural skills. Additionally, it aims to provide guidance to professors with ideas on how to effectively integrate and measure intercultural competence in ESP classes. The questionnaire is focused on gathering data regarding students' language proficiency, intercultural competence, and attitudes towards English-speaking cultures.

Instruments

The questionnaire incorporated a mix of Likert scale questions, open-ended questions, and multiple-choice questions. Overall, the methodology used in the questionnaire aims to gather data on students' perceptions related to intercultural competence and language learning. In this section, the focus will be to analyse the most important questions.

Findings

Section 1 "Demographic Information"

This section provides demographic information. The sample comprised 30.6% male and 69.4% female students from two universities, providing insights into their backgrounds, motivations for learning English, and familiarity with English-speaking countries

Section 2: Language Proficiency"

This section aims to assess student's English language skills, international experience, and their motivation for learning English. It helps us understand the individual's language abilities, their experiences with the language, and the reason why they need to learn and improve their English. This section is essential to help teachers design appropriate learning materials and strategies that align with the learner's goals and needs, understand the learner's motivation, and use different teaching methods based on the latest trends. An important question is to understand their personal goals and areas of interest in their language learning experience. Below is analysed the most important questions of this section.

Question: Why do you need to study English?

The responses to the question about students' motivations for studying English reveal several key reasons for their interest in the language. A notable 45.8% of the students allocated that they study English to increase their career opportunities, especially in international business where English is commonly used for communication. Additionally, 46.3% of students indicated that their motivation for studying English is to communicate with people from different countries. This skill is crucial for collaborating with people around the world. A smaller percentage, 7.9 % of students allocated that they study English to develop their ability to read quickly and critically. This can help individuals to read and comprehend various texts, and stay well-informed about the globalized world.

Section 3 "Language Competences in ESP"

This section examines student's familiarity with English-speaking cultures and the activities they do to enhance their cultural skills. The response to the question, "*How familiar are you with English-speaking countries?*" indicate varying levels of familiarity among students. A significant portion, 45.5 %, reported being moderately familiar with English-speaking cultures. Meanwhile, 24.6 % claimed to be quite familiar, and 28.4% stated they are not familiar at all. It's also noteworthy that a small percentage of 1.5% claimed to be very familiar with English-speaking cultures.

In response to the question, "*What activities do you do to learn English?*" the data suggests that students are familiar with English-speaking cultures, possibly due to the various activities they perform. The most common activities, with 85.1% of students participating, is watching foreign films. Additionally, 40.3% of students reported reading English books as an activity they engage in. These activities that they perform contribute to increasing their cultural understanding and language skills.

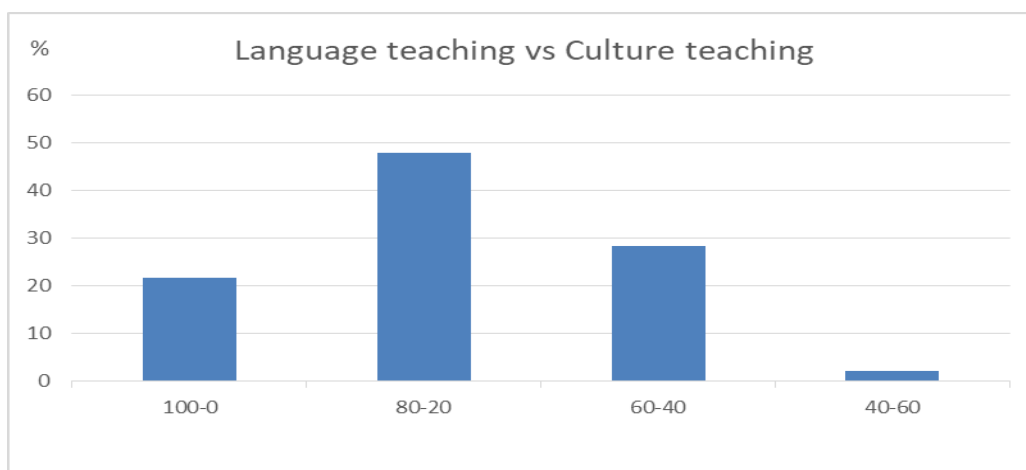
Section 4 "Intercultural Competence"

The final section gathers data regarding intercultural competence and aims to assess student's abilities in this area. This section seeks to uncover the importance of intercultural competence in the learning process, while also identifying areas where students might need improvement. By examining their views and experiences, this section provides valuable insights into how students prioritize different skills for their success in the global market.



Question: “How is the learning time distributed over ‘language teaching’ and ‘culture teaching’ in the class?”

- 100% language teaching–0% culture teaching: (21.6%)
- 80% language teaching–20% culture teaching: (47.8%)
- 60% language teaching–40% culture teaching: (28.4%)
- 40% language teaching–60% culture teaching: (2.2%)



Graph 1 “Language teaching vs. Culture teaching

This graph shows the distribution of learning time between language teaching and culture teaching.

- 100% language teaching - 0% culture teaching: (21.6 %) of students report that teachers focus solely on linguistic competence, and no cultural teaching.
- 80% language teaching-20 % culture teaching: The majority of students, (47.8%) state that their classroom time is dedicated to language (grammar, vocabulary, writing and speaking), with some attention given to culture, reflecting an awareness of cultural relevance alongside language learning.
- 60% language teaching-40 % to culture teaching: (28.4%) of students report a more balanced approach, with 60% devoted to language and 40% to culture teaching.
- 40% language teaching- 60% culture teaching: only (2.2%) of students allocates more learning time to culture teaching than to language teaching.

The data emphasizes that the majority of students recognize the importance of integrating cultural learning into language learning. It is quite obvious that language proficiency does not only include linguistic competence but also cultural competence.

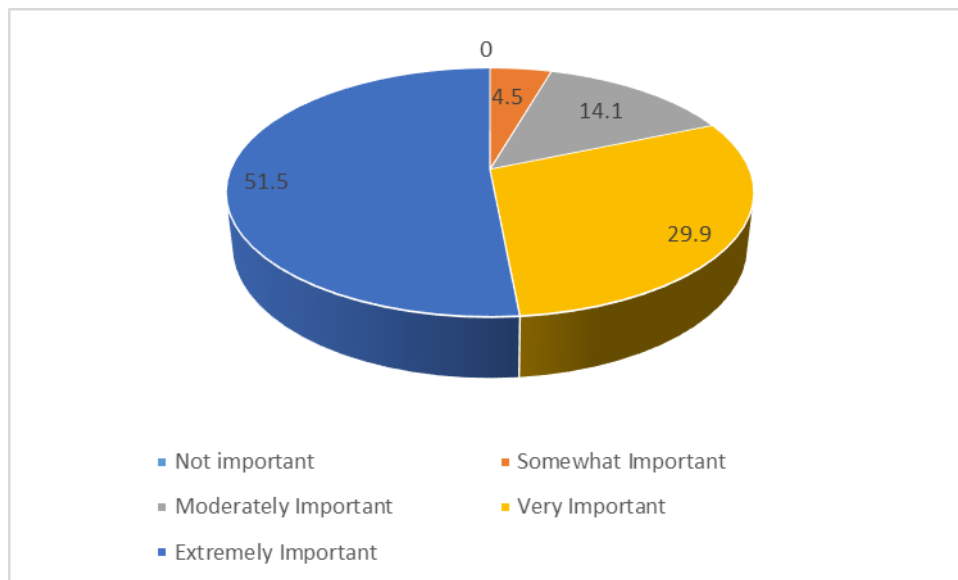
Another important question is whether students value the importance of linguistic competence for successful communication in business.

Question “How important do you think linguistic competence is for successful communication in a business?”

- Not important: 0%
- Somewhat Important: 4.5%
- Moderately Important: 14.1%
- Very Important: 29.9%



Extremely Important: 51.5%



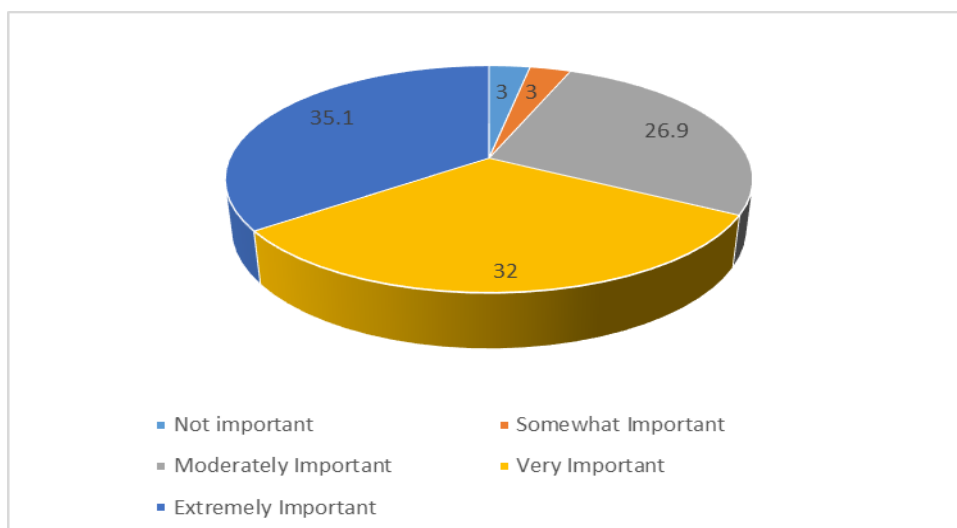
Graph 2. Importance of linguistic competence in business

This data indicates that the majority of students (51.5%) consider linguistic competence to be extremely important for successful communication in business. Additionally, (29.9%) rates it as very important, and (14.1%) rate it as moderately important. This distribution of the data suggests that the majority of students highlight the importance of linguistic competence in business communication. There is a strong consensus among students regarding the importance of linguistic competence to effectively communicate in a business setting.

Question “How important do you think intercultural competence is in achieving successful communication in a multicultural business environment?”

The responses to the question reveal that the majority of students recognize the significance of intercultural competence.

Not Important: 3.0%
Somewhat Important: 3.0%
Moderately Important: 26.9%
Very Important: 32.0%
Extremely Important: 35.1%





Graph 3. Importance of intercultural competence in multicultural business environment

From the data, we can analyse that:

- 35.1 % of the students rated intercultural competence as extremely important for achieving successful communication in a multicultural business environment.
- 32.0% considered to be very important
- 26.9 % considered it as moderately important
- 3.0% consider it “not important”, while another 3.0% view it as “somewhat important”

The data shows that students acknowledge the importance of intercultural competence. A combined total of 67.2% of students rated it as either very important or extremely important by highlighting the need for intercultural skills to succeed.

Limitations

This study has some limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results: the sample size of 134 students limits the generalizability. The study was conducted at two universities, meaning the results might not represent the experiences or needs of students in other institutions.

6. Discussions and Suggestions

The study aimed to assess students' intercultural competence (IC) within the context of ESP and understand to what extent ESP curricula address both linguistic and cultural skills essential for the global workplace. The findings confirm that IC is highly valued in the job market, and indeed, the students surveyed recognize the importance of IC for career advancement. However, the data suggest a gap in how well students feel prepared in IC. These findings highlight the need for a more integrated approach, combining language skills with cultural knowledge to prepare students for intercultural challenges in the workplace.

In the context of ESP, intercultural competence must be seen as a necessity in a globalized world. It is important to expand students' knowledge of different cultures and teach them how to interact effectively with individuals from different backgrounds. This can be done by incorporating authentic materials that expose students to different cultural practices and norms. In addition, it is important to cultivate students' intercultural skills by providing opportunities for them to engage in cross-cultural interactions and reflection. To effectively teach intercultural competence in ESP courses, it is essential to change the course syllabus. This includes updating the syllabus and textbooks used in ESP classes to incorporate intercultural competence. It also means providing professional development opportunities for ESP teachers to develop their own intercultural competence and teaching skills. By prioritizing intercultural competence in ESP education, students will be better prepared to understand the complex and diverse globalized world of work. Teaching them how they could fit into society.

Intercultural competence refers to the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with people from different cultures. In the context of English for specific purposes, promoting intercultural competence involves designing activities that expose learners to the cultural aspects of the language they are learning. Aguilar 2018, suggested focusing on two primary types of activities: those that encourage reflection and interaction.

1. Cultural immersion activities: These activities can be focused more on reading and analysing different literature. For example, if learners are studying business English, they could read various case studies about how different cultures approach negotiations. Learners could practice negotiating a business deal with a client from a different culture, in this way, we are preparing the students for intercultural business encounters. Role-play scenarios, such as meetings, negotiations, and business deals, could be introduced here. They could also analyse different case studies of intercultural competence breakdowns in the business world, and learn how to avoid these issues. In these activities, students can enhance their communication skills and reflect on different issues that may



arise. Even within our own country, we have different norms and values, and it's important to value our own culture first and then learn about other cultures as well.

2. Intercultural comparison activities: These activities can promote comparing and contrasting cultural practices and beliefs from different countries. For example, learners could research and compare how different economic systems work in their own country and another country. Teachers could provide authentic materials about the business world and encourage them to compare and contrast. These activities are considered to be awareness-raising activities and they help students become lifelong learners. Students can also be invited to contribute by sharing any intercultural experience they have had.

3. Cultural reflection and critical thinking activities: Reflection as an important role in developing intercultural competence skills. These kinds of activities involve reflecting on one's own culture and beliefs and how they impact communication with people from different cultures. "Reflection tools can be transformational in encouraging participants to think more deeply about themselves and their experiences" (Deardorff, D, 2020). Reflection tools help examine their experiences in a meaningful way. Overall, reflection tools help analyse their thought, beliefs, values, and behaviours and develop a greater understanding of themselves and the world around them. Learners could also write reflective essays or participate in group discussions where they share their personal experiences and insights.

Through different activities that we could incorporate in the class, we can help prepare students to be good communicators. Overall, promoting intercultural competence in English for specific purposes involves creating opportunities for learners to engage with different cultures and reflect on their own cultural identities. These activities can help learners become more effective communicators in a globalized world. At the end of these activities, teachers could give feedback on students' performance in terms of intercultural competence. Teachers could guide and evaluate students through the interdependent stages of the PEER model (Preparing, Engaging, Evaluating and Reflecting) suggested by Holmes and O'Neill (2012). According to Holmes and O'Neill (2012), these stages are important to consider: the first stage involves preparing students to identify prejudice and stereotypes, the second stage involves engaging students with topics that allow them to share their values, beliefs, and behaviours, the third stage involves evaluating students' interpretation on these issues, and the fourth stage involves encouraging student to reflect critically on their encounters and develop an understanding of their intercultural experience. This model encourages a shift from learning about intercultural competence, in theory, to actually experiencing and evaluating one's own competence in intercultural interaction.

Conclusion

Teaching intercultural competence in ESP should indeed be a new challenge in higher education. In a globalized world, it is crucial that students develop the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively communicate and interact with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. However, there seems to be a lack of interest and practices of intercultural competence in ESP classes. The focus is often solely on meeting the student's professional demands, with little consideration given to the intercultural aspects of communication.

To address this challenge, professors and universities should recognize the importance of intercultural competence in ESP and work towards integrating it into their curricula. This can involve developing new courses or revising existing ones to include intercultural components, even if it includes providing training for professors on how to teach intercultural competence effectively and incorporating international experiences such as study abroad programs or international internships. By incorporating these strategies into your teaching practice, you can help students develop the skills they need to succeed in today's global business environment.

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