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TEACHING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE TODAY: REORIENTING EFL TOWARD ECONOMIC RESILIENCE

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Abstract
As the European Union confronts rising economic fragmentation, geopolitical realignment, and intensified competition over supply chains, technology, and regulatory influence, the capacity to communicate strategically across cultures has become a form of soft power and institutional competence. This article examines how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and intercultural communication courses in European higher education can be reoriented to support these strategic priorities.
Moving beyond a traditional focus on linguistic proficiency, the paper argues for the integration of strategic communication skills that address economic resilience, institutional cooperation, and policy awareness. Drawing on classroom-based research and teaching practice, it presents concrete pedagogical approaches including policy-oriented simulations, critical discourse analysis of European business and institutional communication, and the development of regionally sensitive intercultural competence.
Particular attention is paid to the challenges educators face when balancing language development with complex content, adapting materials to rapidly shifting geopolitical realities, and ensuring accessibility across heterogeneous student cohorts. The article positions English for Specific Purposes and intercultural communication not merely as skills training, but as contributions to Europe's broader effort to strengthen its strategic agency in a fragmented global economy.
Keywords: *strategic communication; English for Specific Purposes; intercultural competence; European higher education; economic resilience; European Union.*
JEL Classification: I23; I25; M14; M16.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the European Union has faced a series of overlapping pressures that have exposed the limits of earlier assumptions about economic interdependence and institutional stability. Supply-chain disruptions, technological competition, industrial policy shifts, and the reconfiguration of global trade relationships have contributed to what many observers describe as a

more fragmented global economy. Within this context, communication is no longer a secondary or purely facilitative skill. It has become a strategic resource: the ability to frame positions, negotiate across divergent institutional cultures, manage ambiguity, and build coalitions now directly affects organizational effectiveness and policy outcomes. Higher education institutions across Europe are under increasing pressure to prepare graduates for these conditions. English-language and intercultural communication courses occupy a particularly important position in this effort. English functions as the dominant lingua franca of European business, diplomacy, and institutional coordination, while intercultural competence is essential for collaboration across member states and with external partners. Yet many existing approaches to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and intercultural communication still prioritise general professional fluency or static cultural knowledge. They often do not stress enough the strategic, policy-aware, and power-sensitive dimensions of communication that current European conditions demand. This article argues that EFL and intercultural communication teaching in European higher education can and should be reoriented toward strategic communication. Drawing on classroom-based research and teaching experience, it examines how language and communication courses can incorporate policy-relevant content, simulation-based learning, and critical engagement with European business and institutional discourse. The aim is not merely to improve linguistic accuracy or cultural sensitivity, but to develop graduates capable of operating effectively in complex, multi-level European and international environments. In doing so, the paper positions communication education as a modest but meaningful contribution to Europe's broader effort to strengthen its economic resilience and institutional capacity in a fragmented global order.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMING

The argument developed in this article relies on three theoretical domains: strategic communication, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) regarded through a critical and lingua-franca lens, and intercultural competence understood as a dynamic, context-sensitive practice rather than a fixed set of cultural characteristics. Together, these three perspectives offer a coherent basis for reorienting language and communication teaching in European higher education toward the demands of a fragmented global economy.

Strategic communication is understood here not merely as the efficient transmission of messages, but as the purposeful use of communication to advance organisational or institutional objectives in complex and contested environments (Hallahan et al., 2007). In the contemporary European context, such objectives increasingly include economic resilience, regulatory coordination, supply-chain security, and the maintenance of institutional legitimacy across diverse political and cultural settings. Communication

becomes strategic when it involves framing issues, managing ambiguity, negotiating competing interests, and constructing shared meaning under conditions of uncertainty and power asymmetry. This view moves beyond traditional public-relations or marketing conceptions and aligns more closely with recent European scholarship that treats strategic communication as a constitutive organisational and political practice (Zerfass et al., 2018). For higher education, the implication is easy to notice graduates who will work in business, policy, international organisations, or cross-border projects require more than fluent English or general cultural awareness. They need the capacity to recognise how communication itself shapes economic and institutional outcomes. This strategic orientation must be brought into dialogue with developments in ESP and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). Classical ESP approaches have long emphasised needs analysis and the teaching of genre-specific linguistic features for professional settings. While valuable, such approaches risk remaining instrumental if they treat language primarily as a neutral tool for pre-defined professional tasks. More recent critical and ELF-informed perspectives challenge this limitation. They highlight that English in European professional and institutional contexts is rarely a native-speaker variety used under stable conditions; rather, it functions as a shared but unevenly distributed resource among speakers from multiple linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Jenkins, 2015; Seidlhofer, 2011). Communication success depends less on conformity to native norms than on pragmatic adaptability, mutual accommodation, and the ability to negotiate meaning across difference. Moreover, professional discourse is never ideologically neutral. Business and policy texts corporate reports, Commission communications, regulatory proposals, or crisis statements encode particular assumptions about markets, sovereignty, risk, and cooperation. A critical ESP approach should encourage students not only to produce appropriate language, but also to analyse how language constructs and legitimises particular economic and political realities (Fairclough, 2013). In the teaching class, this means treating authentic European institutional and business discourse as both a linguistic resource and an object of critical inquiry. Another pillar of the framework is intercultural competence. Traditional models, such as Byram's (1997) intercultural communicative competence or Deardorff's (2006) process-oriented model, remain useful in identifying the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for effective interaction across cultural boundaries. However, they must be adapted to the specific conditions of contemporary Europe. Cultural difference within the European Union is not primarily a matter of national stereotypes or distant "other" cultures; it is often a matter of divergent institutional cultures, administrative traditions, professional norms, and regional economic priorities that operate within a shared political and legal framework. Intercultural competence in this setting involves the ability to recognise how communication practices differ across member states and institutional levels,

how these differences affect collaboration and decision-making, and how power relations shape whose communicative norms prevail. Critical approaches to interculturality further warn against essentialising culture and instead emphasise the fluid, situational, and power-laden nature of intercultural meetings (Holliday, 2011). For pedagogical purposes, this translates into tasks that require students to analyse real communicative situations or successful negotiations in European business and policy contexts, and to reflect on the relationship between linguistic choices, cultural assumptions, and institutional constraints. When these three strands are brought together, strategic communication education emerges as a distinctive pedagogical orientation. It treats English not simply as a vehicle for professional content, but as a medium through which economic and institutional relations are enacted and contested. It views intercultural competence not as an add-on soft skill, but as an integral component of the capacity to operate effectively in multi-level European environments. And it positions the language classroom as a site where students can begin to develop the analytical and practical resources needed to navigate a global economy marked by fragmentation, competition, and shifting alliances. The following sections examine how this theoretical orientation can be translated into concrete classroom practices, while also acknowledging the tensions and limitations that arise when complex policy content is introduced into language-focused courses.

3. THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT: WHY STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION MATTERS NOW

The contemporary European economy functions under totally different conditions than those of the post-Cold War period. For decades, deeper market integration, liberalised trade, and the expansion of global value chains were widely treated as both inevitable and largely beneficial. Recent years have unsettled these assumptions. A succession of shocks including the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's conflict with Ukraine, the intensification of technological rivalry, and renewed industrial policy competition has exposed vulnerabilities in supply chains, energy systems, and critical technologies. In response, European institutions and member states have increasingly emphasised concepts such as strategic autonomy, economic security, de-risking, and resilience. These shifts are not merely technical adjustments in trade or industrial policy; they reconfigure the communicative demands placed on organisations, public institutions, and the professionals who staff them. Economic fragmentation does not mean the disappearance of interdependence. Rather, it involves a more selective, politicised, and contested form of interdependence, in which decisions about investment, sourcing, regulation, and partnership are shaped by geopolitical considerations as much as by pure market logic. In this environment, communication becomes a strategic practice in several interrelated ways. First, organisations must frame their positions and interests in ways that

resonate across different national and institutional audiences. A company seeking regulatory approval, a ministry coordinating industrial strategy, or an EU agency managing a cross-border programme must communicate in registers that acknowledge both shared European frameworks and divergent domestic priorities. Second, negotiation and coalition-building require the capacity to manage ambiguity, interpret indirect signals, and maintain relationships under conditions of mistrust or competing agendas. Third, legitimacy itself is communicative: the acceptance of new industrial policies, state-aid regimes, or external partnerships depends in part on how these initiatives are explained, justified, and contested in public and professional discourse. These dynamics are visible across multiple domains. Corporate communication now frequently addresses supply-chain resilience, dual-use technologies, and alignment with European regulatory standards such as the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism or the Chips Act. Institutional communication from the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and national governments increasingly combines technical policy language with broader narratives of security, competitiveness, and solidarity. Cross-border business collaboration whether in energy, digital infrastructure, or manufacturing requires participants to navigate differences in administrative culture, decision-making styles, and expectations regarding transparency and hierarchy. In all these settings, English functions as the primary working language, yet the communicative challenges are rarely reducible to vocabulary or grammar. They involve strategic framing, audience awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and an understanding of the institutional and political contexts in which messages circulate. Higher education institutions are directly implicated in this landscape. Graduates entering European and international labour markets are expected to operate in environments where linguistic proficiency alone is insufficient. Employers in business, consulting, public administration, and international organisations increasingly value the ability to analyse complex policy documents, participate in multilingual negotiations, adapt communicative style to different institutional cultures, and recognise how power and interest shape professional discourse. Traditional EFL and even many ESP courses, focused primarily on general professional fluency or sector-specific terminology, only partially address these requirements. A more deliberate orientation toward strategic communication is therefore not an optional enhancement but a response to structural changes in the European political economy. At the same time, the European context presents particular pedagogical opportunities. Unlike purely global or bilateral settings, European professional communication often takes place within a dense institutional architecture that combines shared legal frameworks with persistent national and regional differences. This multilevel character makes Europe a productive laboratory for developing the needed competences to deal with diversity within common structures, translating between local and supranational logics, and

communicating under conditions of partial integration that are increasingly relevant beyond the continent as well. The following section examines how these contextual demands can be translated into concrete classroom practices.

4. PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES

Translating the theoretical and contextual arguments outlined above into classroom practice requires a deliberate shift from language instruction conceived primarily as skills training toward a pedagogy that treats communication as a strategic, situated, and reflective activity. The approaches presented here are drawn from classroom-based experience in undergraduate and postgraduate courses in English for Specific Purposes and intercultural communication at European higher education institutions. They do not constitute a fixed curriculum, but rather a set of interrelated practices designed to develop students' capacity to operate in complex European and international professional environments. A central pedagogical strategy is the use of simulation-based learning structured around realistic European scenarios. Rather than generic role-plays focused on meetings or presentations, these simulations are built around concrete situations that reflect current economic and institutional realities: cross-border supply-chain negotiations under conditions of geopolitical tension, coordination meetings between national and EU-level actors on industrial policy, crisis communication following regulatory or reputational shocks, or multi-stakeholder consultations involving business, public authorities, and civil society. Students are assigned roles that require them to represent different organisational or national perspectives, prepare position papers, and engage in extended interaction in English. The design deliberately introduces asymmetry of information, competing priorities, and cultural or institutional differences in communicative style. Debriefing sessions then move beyond linguistic feedback to examine how framing choices, turn-taking patterns, degrees of directness, and the management of disagreement influenced outcomes. In this way, simulations become sites for practising both linguistic performance and strategic awareness. A second approach centres on the critical analysis of authentic European business and institutional discourse. Students work with a range of texts, including European Commission communications, corporate sustainability and risk reports, speeches by EU and national leaders, regulatory proposals, and media coverage of industrial or trade policy. The analytical focus is twofold. At the linguistic level, students examine genre features, rhetorical moves, and specialised vocabulary. At the strategic level, they investigate how these texts construct problems and solutions, allocate responsibility, manage legitimacy, and position European actors in relation to global competitors. Tasks may include comparative analysis of how the same policy issue is framed for different audiences, or the rewriting of a text to address a different institutional or national readership. Such activities train students to read professional discourse not merely for information, but as purposeful

communicative action shaped by power, interest, and context. Intercultural competence is developed not through the transmission of national cultural profiles, but through sustained attention to communicative variation within European professional settings. Classroom activities focus on differences in meeting cultures, decision-making styles, expectations regarding hierarchy and consensus, and norms of written versus oral communication across member states and organisational types. Students are asked to analyse documented cases of miscommunication or successful collaboration in European projects and to reflect on the interplay between linguistic choices and institutional cultures. Pair and group work is structured to surface and examine these differences rather than to suppress them in the name of fluency. The aim is to cultivate a reflective stance that enables students to adapt their own communicative behaviour while remaining attentive to the power dynamics that shape whose norms become dominant in mixed settings. These practices are supported by scaffolding that addresses the inevitable tension between content complexity and language proficiency. Complex policy or business materials are introduced gradually, with pre-task vocabulary and conceptual work, guided reading protocols, and opportunities for collaborative preparation. Assessment combines traditional language criteria with explicit evaluation of strategic and intercultural dimensions: the clarity and appropriateness of framing, the ability to adjust register and style to different audiences, and the capacity to reflect on communicative choices and their consequences. In this way, language development and strategic competence are treated as mutually reinforcing rather than competing objectives. Collectively, these approaches seek to position the language classroom as a space in which students can rehearse the communicative demands of a fragmented European and global economy. They do not claim to replicate professional reality in full, nor do they assume that classroom practice alone can produce fully formed strategic communicators. Their contribution lies in making visible the connections between linguistic performance, intercultural awareness, and the institutional and economic contexts in which graduates will operate, and in providing structured opportunities to develop the analytical and practical resources required to navigate those contexts.

5. CHALLENGES AND TENSIONS

The pedagogical orientation outlined above is not without significant difficulties. Integrating strategic and policy-relevant content into language and intercultural communication courses generates a series of tensions that educators must navigate carefully. These challenges are not merely practical obstacles; they reveal deeper questions about the purpose of language teaching in higher education. One persistent tension concerns the balance between linguistic development and content complexity. Authentic materials drawn from European institutional and business discourse regulatory texts, policy communications,

corporate risk reports are frequently dense, specialised, and conceptually demanding. For students at intermediate or even upper-intermediate levels of proficiency, the cognitive load of processing such content can quickly overwhelm linguistic processing capacity. When this occurs, the risk is that language learning is subordinated to content comprehension, or, conversely, that complex materials are so heavily simplified that their strategic and institutional significance is lost. Effective scaffolding can mitigate but not eliminate this problem. Educators must continually adjust the level of support, the sequencing of tasks, and the degree of conceptual abstraction, often within heterogeneous groups where proficiency levels and prior knowledge of European affairs vary considerably. Another challenge arises from the rapid evolution of the very contexts the courses seek to address. Economic and geopolitical conditions change faster than curriculum materials can be updated. Scenarios built around particular supply-chain vulnerabilities, regulatory initiatives, or geopolitical alignments can become outdated within a short period. This places a continuous demand on teachers to monitor current developments and revise materials, a requirement that is difficult to sustain alongside ordinary teaching loads. There is also a risk that an emphasis on topicality leads to a form of presentism, in which longer-term institutional and communicative patterns are neglected in favour of the most recent crisis or policy announcement. Inclusivity may also represent a difficulty. Courses that favour strategic communication and European policy risk privileging students who already possess greater cultural capital, prior exposure to institutional discourse, or higher levels of English proficiency. Students from less internationally oriented educational backgrounds, or those whose primary academic interests lie outside business and policy fields, may experience the content as alienating or excessively specialised. Ensuring that tasks remain accessible without diluting intellectual demand requires careful differentiation and a conscious effort to validate diverse forms of knowledge and communicative experience. The danger of reproducing existing inequalities under the guise of professional relevance is real and must be addressed explicitly in course design. Finally, the introduction of policy-oriented and strategically framed content raises questions of neutrality and educator positionality. Discussions of economic resilience, strategic autonomy, or geopolitical competition are rarely value-free. Teachers must decide how to present contested concepts without imposing particular political interpretations, while still enabling students to analyse the communicative construction of these concepts. Maintaining analytical distance is especially important in classrooms that bring together students from different member states or with divergent political perspectives. The goal is not to advocate a specific policy stance, but to develop students' capacity to recognise how communication participates in the legitimation and contestation of policy choices. Achieving this balance requires pedagogical tact and a clear articulation of the course's educational rather than

advocacy-oriented purpose. These challenges do not invalidate the case for a more strategic orientation in EFL and intercultural communication teaching. They do, however, underscore that such an orientation cannot be implemented through the simple addition of new topics or activities. It demands ongoing professional judgement, institutional support for curriculum development, and a realistic appraisal of what classroom practice can and cannot achieve. The following section considers the broader implications of these pedagogical and institutional questions.

6. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The preceding analysis suggests that English-language and intercultural communication courses in European higher education occupy a more consequential position than is often acknowledged. When oriented toward strategic communication, these courses can contribute to the formation of graduates capable of operating in environments marked by economic fragmentation, institutional complexity, and geopolitical uncertainty. This contribution is modest and mediated: classrooms do not directly shape European industrial policy or corporate strategy. Yet they constitute one of the few structured spaces in which future professionals can systematically examine the communicative dimensions of the economic and institutional contexts they will enter. Several implications follow for curriculum design and for the institutional location of language teaching. First, the traditional separation between "language skills" and "content" knowledge becomes increasingly difficult to sustain. If communication is understood as constitutive of professional and institutional practice rather than merely facilitative of it, then language courses cannot remain confined to the development of general proficiency or even sector-specific terminology. They must engage, at an appropriate level, with the discursive construction of economic and political realities. This does not require language teachers to become experts in European industrial policy or international political economy. It does require a willingness to work with authentic materials from these domains and to treat them as objects of both linguistic and critical analysis. Second, the argument advanced here has consequences for how intercultural competence is conceptualised and taught. Models that emphasise national cultural differences or universal soft skills remain insufficient in a European context characterised by multilevel governance and overlapping institutional cultures. More productive approaches focus on the communicative practices that emerge within and across specific professional and organisational settings, and on the power relations that shape whose communicative norms become authoritative. Such an orientation aligns intercultural education more closely with the actual conditions of European professional life and reduces the risk of cultural essentialism. Third, the integration of strategic and policy-relevant content places new demands on teacher expertise and institutional

support. Language educators are rarely trained to work with complex institutional discourse or to design simulations that incorporate geopolitical and economic variables. Realising the pedagogical potential outlined in this article therefore depends on opportunities for professional development, collaborative curriculum design with colleagues in business, European studies, or political science, and realistic workload recognition. Without such support, the risk is that strategic communication remains an aspirational discourse rather than an embedded pedagogical practice. The classroom-based nature of the evidence presented here necessarily limits the scope of the claims that can be made. The practices described have been developed and observed in particular institutional settings with specific student cohorts. Their transferability to other national systems, institutional types, or proficiency levels cannot be assumed. Further research is needed to examine how different pedagogical designs interact with varying student backgrounds, how strategic communication competences develop over longer periods, and how graduates subsequently mobilise these competences in professional contexts. Longitudinal and multi-institutional studies would be particularly valuable in assessing the longer-term effects of the approaches discussed. Nevertheless, the central claim remains: in a period when Europe's economic and institutional environment is characterised by fragmentation and strategic competition, the capacity to communicate across difference with analytical awareness and practical adaptability constitutes a relevant professional and civic resource. Language and intercultural communication teaching can contribute to the development of this resource, provided it is willing to move beyond a narrow conception of linguistic proficiency and to engage seriously with the communicative demands of the contemporary European context. The final section briefly considers the broader significance of this reorientation.

7. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that English-language and intercultural communication teaching in European higher education can play a meaningful role in preparing graduates for the communicative demands of a fragmented global economy. By reorienting EFL and ESP courses toward strategic communication understood as the purposeful, context-sensitive use of language to navigate institutional complexity, economic uncertainty, and cross-border collaboration language education can move beyond a narrow focus on linguistic proficiency or generic soft skills. The European context provides both the rationale and the opportunity for such a reorientation. Economic fragmentation, geopolitical competition, and the pursuit of strategic autonomy have elevated the importance of framing, negotiation, and legitimacy work in professional and institutional settings. Classroom practices that combine simulation of realistic European scenarios, critical analysis of authentic business and policy discourse,

and reflection on communicative variation across institutional cultures offer concrete ways of developing the relevant competences. At the same time, the challenges of content complexity, material currency, inclusivity, and educator positionality must be acknowledged and addressed through careful pedagogical design and institutional support.

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