Speaking the Same Language? Cultural Differences in Written Business Communication between Germany and the Asian/IPBC Region

Johanna Deger and Andreas Zehetner
University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria, Steyr, Austria

johanna.deger@students.fh-steyr.at
andreas.zehetner@fh-ooe.at

Abstract: In multinational organizations, internal email communication is one of the backbones of coordination across countries and time zones. This paper examines how culturally shaped communication styles influence understanding between a German headquarters and partners in the Asian/IPBC region. The analysis focuses on paired email exchanges and selected interviews from German, Vietnamese and Indian business partners. The findings show that the German side communicates in a direct, task-oriented, and documentation-focused manner, while the Vietnamese side tends to adapt more closely to this style and the Indian side combines relational warmth with a more variable use of directness and indirectness. Misunderstandings arise less from language errors than from different expectations about explicitness, responsibility, urgency, and conflict handling. The paper argues that successful collaboration depends on cultural intelligence, clearer framing of requests, and an awareness that concise email writing can be efficient in one context and potentially ambiguous or abrupt in another.

Keywords: Cross-cultural management, Intercultural communication, Cultural intelligence, Leadership styles, Global collaboration

1. Introduction

Global business increasingly relies on digitally mediated communication across countries, cultures and linguistic backgrounds. Email is still an important coordination mechanism in multinational organizations, particularly for communicating tasks, deadlines, responsibilities, and traceable decisions. However, digital communication is not insensitive to intercultural differences. The absence of nonverbal cues can make differences in directness, politeness and expectations about response and responsibility more consequential (Holtbrügge et al. 2013; Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta 2012). Recent research shows that language and national differences are important barriers to digital communication in multinational firms (Tanaka 2023), while international business emails rely on interpersonal strategies to create common ground and maintain relationships (Liu and Liu 2023).

The problem now is that the same business message may be interpreted differently depending on culturally shaped expectations about what should be stated explicitly, how requests and disagreements should be expressed, and how relationships should be maintained. Understanding these differences is particularly important in multinational organizations, where communication is embedded not only in national cultures but also in specific headquarters–subsidiary and business-partner relationships.

While previous research has established that culture influences communication styles and that digital business communication can generate intercultural misunderstandings, less is known about how such differences unfold in authentic, paired email exchanges within a multinational organizational setting. Much of the existing literature examines cultural communication patterns at a general level or focuses on individual communication strategies rather than examining how messages and responses interact in everyday organizational communication. This study addresses this gap by analyzing authentic business-email exchanges between a German headquarters and two culturally distinct partner contexts: Vietnam and India.

The study asks how culturally shaped patterns of directness, politeness, hierarchy, contextual dependence, urgency, and misunderstanding become visible in everyday written business communication. Rather than treating “Asian communication” as a homogeneous category, the study compares Germany–Vietnam and Germany–India interactions to identify where communication patterns converge, where they differ, and how these differences affect collaboration. Its novelty lies in combining a cross-cultural comparative perspective with close analysis of paired, naturally occurring business emails from an actual multinational organization, providing a contextualized account of how national communication patterns interact with organizational relationships and practical coordination in international business.

2. Theoretical Foundations

The theoretical foundations of this study provide the conceptual basis for understanding how cultural differences shape written communication in multinational organizations. As global companies increasingly rely on geographically dispersed teams, written communication has become one of the most important mechanisms for coordination, knowledge sharing, and relationship management across borders. Although English is frequently used as a common corporate language, communication processes continue to be influenced by culturally embedded assumptions regarding politeness, hierarchy, clarity, and professionalism. To analyze these dynamics, this study draws on established theories from intercultural communication and cross-cultural management, particularly Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory (Hofstede 2011) and Hall's distinction between high-context and low-context communication (Hall 1976).

2.1 The Cultural Variable

The paper is grounded in the idea that communication is culturally patterned rather than neutral. Hofstede's cultural dimensions help explain why directness, hierarchy orientation, individual responsibility, and uncertainty avoidance differ across national contexts (Hofstede et al. 2010). In this perspective, Germany is commonly associated with low power distance, a strong emphasis on clarity, and a preference for direct, explicit communication. Vietnam and India, by contrast, are often described as contexts in which hierarchy, relationship orientation, and more indirect forms of expression play a larger role. These differences shape how requests are formulated, disagreement is expressed, and responsibility is attributed in professional interaction.

Hall's high-context and low-context theory adds another useful lens. Low-context communication assumes that most relevant information should be made explicit in the message itself, while high-context communication relies more heavily on shared knowledge, relationships, and situational cues (Hall 1976).

In email communication, this distinction becomes especially relevant because the medium strips away nonverbal context. A short message that is perfectly sufficient in a low-context environment may appear vague in a high-context setting, while a carefully softened message may appear indirect or evasive to a low-context reader. Earlier research confirms that email style is shaped by cultural background and is associated with differences in formalness, promptness, preciseness, task-relatedness, and relationship-relatedness (Holtbrügge et al. 2013). Likewise, research on international internal communication shows that language choice and internal communication style are tightly connected to organizational coordination and trust (Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta 2012). Studies on multinational teams further suggest that language differences affect power dynamics and the ability of team members to act on their expertise (Tenzer and Pudelko 2017).

2.2 Written Communication in International Business

Written communication plays a central role in multinational organizations because it enables employees across countries and time zones to exchange information, coordinate activities, and document decisions. Email communication, in particular, has become one of the most widely used communication channels in international business environments due to its efficiency, accessibility, and asynchronous nature (Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta 2012). In global organizations, written communication often functions as the primary medium through which professional relationships are maintained and organizational tasks are coordinated. As a result, the ability to communicate effectively in intercultural written exchanges has become increasingly important for organizational performance and international collaboration.

However, written communication in intercultural settings is also highly susceptible to misunderstandings because it lacks nonverbal cues such as tone of voice, facial expressions, and gestures (Ting-Toomey and Chung 2005). Employees from different cultural backgrounds may interpret the same message differently depending on their communication norms and expectations (Müller-Frommeyer and Kauffeld 2021). Research shows that communication styles vary significantly between cultures with regard to directness, politeness strategies, hierarchy orientation, and contextual framing (Holtbrügge et al. 2013; Hofweber and Jaworska 2022). In low-context cultures such as Germany, communication tends to be explicit, direct, and task-oriented, whereas high-context cultures often place greater emphasis on relational harmony, indirectness, and implicit understanding (Hall 1976). Consequently, messages that are perceived as efficient and professional in one cultural context may be interpreted as impolite or unclear in another. These differences are particularly relevant in email communication because employees must rely exclusively on written language to interpret intentions, urgency, and interpersonal tone.

The increasing use of English as a Business Lingua Franca (BELF) further complicates intercultural communication processes in multinational organizations. Although English enables collaboration across linguistic boundaries, it does not automatically eliminate cultural differences in communication behavior (Kankaanranta and Salminen 2013; Roshid et al. 2022). Instead, employees continue to apply culturally shaped communication patterns when writing in English. Recent research on intercultural business email communication shows that differences in directness, politeness, and pragmatic strategies can influence how requests and intentions are communicated across cultural contexts (Park et al. 2021; Al-Khatib 2021). Therefore, effective intercultural communication requires not only language proficiency but also intercultural awareness and the ability to adapt communication styles to diverse cultural contexts.

2.3 Empirical Context

The empirical context of this study focuses on communication processes between the German headquarters of Company X and subsidiaries or business partners in Vietnam and India. These countries were selected because they represent important operational environments within the organization and provide distinct cultural contexts for examining intercultural communication in multinational business settings. Germany serves as the headquarters context and reflects the dominant organizational communication style, while Vietnam and India represent culturally different environments in which communication norms, hierarchy perceptions, and relationship orientation differ significantly from the German context. The selected country combination therefore offers a suitable framework for analyzing how cultural differences influence written communication in everyday organizational practice.

Germany is commonly associated with a comparatively low-context communication style characterized by directness, clarity, and efficiency (Hall 1976). Communication in German business environments often prioritizes explicit information exchange, task orientation, and straightforward feedback. Hofstede's cultural dimensions further describe Germany as relatively individualistic and comparatively low in power distance, meaning that communication tends to be less hierarchical and more focused on personal responsibility and transparent interaction (Hofstede 2011). In contrast, Vietnam is generally characterized as a collectivist and high-context culture in which communication places stronger emphasis on politeness, harmony, and hierarchical sensitivity. Messages are often formulated more indirectly to preserve interpersonal relationships and avoid confrontation. Similarly, communication practices in India frequently combine relationship orientation with hierarchical awareness and contextual flexibility, although communication styles may vary depending on organizational and regional contexts (Thomas and Peterson 2016).

The decision to focus on Germany, Vietnam, and India was made for both theoretical and practical reasons. From a theoretical perspective, the selected countries represent different cultural dimensions regarding directness, hierarchy orientation, collectivism, and contextual communication, making them particularly relevant for intercultural communication research. From a practical perspective, all three country contexts are directly connected through ongoing collaboration within Company X, ensuring that the empirical analysis is based on authentic workplace communication rather than hypothetical intercultural scenarios. The study therefore contributes to existing intercultural management research by examining how cultural differences manifest in real organizational communication processes and how employees interpret and negotiate meaning in international email exchanges.

3. Methodology

Methodologically, the study draws on document analysis as a qualitative research method. Bowen emphasizes that documents are valuable because they are naturally occurring traces of organizational activity and allow researchers to examine communication in context (Bowen 2009). The READ approach further structures document analysis through the steps of readying, extracting, analyzing, and distilling, making it particularly suitable for systematic analysis of paired email exchanges (Dalglish et al. 2020). Together, these frameworks justify a close reading of authentic business emails as evidence of recurring communication patterns rather than isolated incidents.

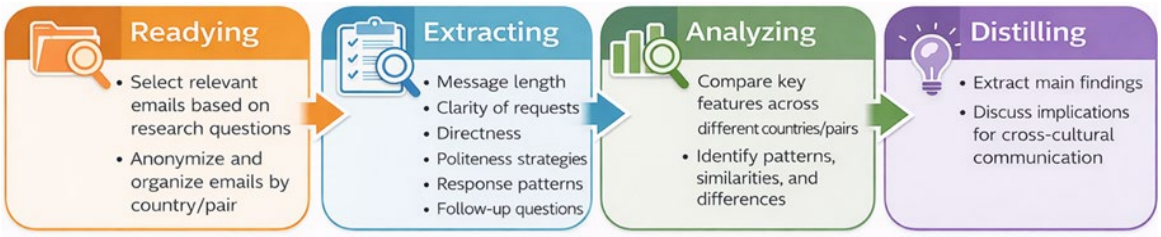


Figure 1: The READ approach (Dalglish et al. 2020)

The empirical part of the thesis uses a qualitative document analysis of internal email exchanges between the German headquarters and two partner contexts: a Vietnamese subsidiary and an Indian business partner. The corpus consists of fifteen paired email threads in total, five from Germany-Vietnam and nine from Germany-India, supplemented by selected semi-structured interviews that were used to contextualize the email findings. The material was anonymized throughout, and all company- and person-specific identifiers were removed. The analysis therefore focuses on communication patterns, not on individuals.

The emails were examined as paired interactions, meaning that each initial message was analyzed together with the corresponding reply. This design makes it possible to observe how requests, explanations, delays, and clarifications were interpreted and responded to. Following the READ approach, the material was first prepared and organized by country pair, then key communicative features were extracted, then compared across cases, and finally distilled into broader patterns. The coding scheme captured directness, politeness markers, hierarchy orientation, contextual dependence, clarity of requests, urgency framing, and signs of misunderstanding.

Table 1: Theoretical constructs and observable codes derived from them

Theoretical Construct	Observable Email Features
Hofstede (Hofstede 2011):	
Power Distance	Use of titles, formal salutations, polite or indirect language towards authorities
Individualism/Collectivism	Use of “I” versus “we”, individual versus group responsibility
Uncertainty Avoidance	Level of detail, clear instructions, structured messages, follow-up questions
Masculinity/Femininity	Task- versus relationship-focused language, direct vs. polite tone
Hall (Hall 1976):	
High-context	Indirect wording/instructions, implied requests, less explicit phrasing
Low-context	Direct wording/instructions, clearly stated expectations, explicit phrasing
Direct vs. Indirect	Commands versus softened requests, e.g. “Could you…” or “Please…”
Formality (Yadav 2025)	Use of greetings, closings, level of professionalism
Hierarchy (Gilbert 2012)	Task assignments, performance monitoring, references to agreements, managers in CC
Clarity vs. Ambiguity (Byron 2008)	Clear tasks and deadline versus unclear or implicit wording
Misunderstanding (Lim et al. 2022)	Follow-up questions, corrections, reporting differences, requests for clarification
Politeness strategies (Moon 2023)	Use of “please”, “kindly”, “thank you”, apologies, friendly openings/closings, soft phrasing
Time Orientation/Urgency (Fulmer et al. 2014)	Specific dates, phrases such as “ASAP” or “before month end”, statements highlighting urgency

Sources: Hall 1976; Byron 2008; Hofstede 2011; Gilbert 2012; Fulmer et al. 2014; Lim et al. 2022; Moon 2023; Yadav 2025)

Across both country groups, 2,154 coded segments were identified, which shows that the data were rich enough to support a detailed qualitative comparison.

Themes and Subthemes	Codes	Code Frequency	Theme Frequency
Code System | Total Coded Segments			**2154**
Cultural Differences			**1483**
Time Orientation / Urgency	Concrete Deadline	45	
	Urgency Marker	24	
	Progress & Status Update	14	
	Future Planning & Scheduling	14	**97**
Direct Communication	Direct Assertion	89	
	Direct Refusal / Rejection	19	
	Direct Complaint / Confrontation	32	
	Direct Instruction / Request	73	**213**
Indirect Communication	Indirect Assertion	38	
	Indirect Refusal / Rejection	10	
	Indirect Complaint / Confrontation	10	
	Indirect Instruction/ Request	71	**129**
Politeness Strategies	Requests & Directives	74	
	Rapport &Relationship	79	
	Gratitude & Appreciation	88	
	Apology &Face-Saving	9	
	Commitment &Collaboration	27	
	InformationTransfer	21	**298**
Cultural Dimensions	Power Distance / Hierarchy	48	
	Uncertainty Avoidance	89	
	Collectivism	3	
	Individualism	0	**140**
High-context Communication	Implicit Status Information	11	
	Implicit Problem & Error Statement	9	
	Implicit Cost & Financial Statement	8	
	Implicit Planning & Action Statement	4	**32**
Low-context Communication	Explicit Status Information	69	
	Explicit Problem & Error Statement	72	
	Explicit Cost & Financial Statement	39	
	Explicit Planning & Action Statement	62	**242**
Task Orientation	Status & Updates	71	
	Problem & Complaint	50	
	Instructions & Requests	83	
	Cost & Finance	51	
	Planning & Decision-Making	47	**302**
Relationship Orientation	Relationship Maintenance	12	
	Relationship Building	8	
	Relationship Repair	3	
	Relationship Appreciation	7	**30**

Themes and Subthemes	Codes	Code Frequency	Theme Frequency
Impact on Mutual Understanding			**671**
Understanding Gaps / Misinterpretation	Clarification Request	27	
	Information Gap	22	
	Error & Confusion	16	
	Alignment & Verification	12	**77**
Coordination Efficiency / Delays	Meeting & Communication Coordination	43	
	Task Delegation & Follow-Up	42	
	Delivery & Shipment Coordination	114	
	Delay & Obstacle	24	**223**
Escalation & Pressure Dynamics	Urgency Pressure	30	
	Repeated Request & Persistence	13	
	Financial & Business Pressure	21	
	Direct Escalation	17	**81**
Responsibility Alignment / Conflict	Responsibility Attribution	44	
	Responsibility Rejection	32	
	Agreement & Alignment	48	
	Dispute & Conflict	52	**176**
Conflict & Resolution Behaviour	Conflict Trigger	27	
	Conflict Avoidance	23	
	Conflict Escalation	25	
	Conflict Resolution	39	**114**

Figure 2: Code map (Source: Authors' analysis using MAXQDA based on the empirical data; theoretical interpretation informed by the literature cited in Table 1.)

In parallel to the email content analysis, interviews were conducted. The interviews did not function as independent data sources in a separate quantitative sense. Instead, they served as interpretive support. They helped explain why certain exchanges were written the way they were and whether the communicative effects visible in the emails aligned with the participants' own experience. This triangulation strengthened the credibility of the findings and made it possible to distinguish between actual misunderstanding, operational delay, and deliberate communication style adaptation.

4. Findings

The empirical analysis is based on a total of fifteen internal business email exchanges, organized into two country pairs: Germany-Vietnam (GER-VIE-01 to GER-VIE-05) and Germany-India (GER-IND-01 to GER-IND-09). All emails were collected from Company X and represent authentic, day-to-day operational communication between the German headquarters and respective country departments. The emails cover topics such as shipment coordination, financial clarifications, meeting arrangements, and strategic planning.

The analysis shows a clear and consistent German communication style across both country relationships. The German side writes in a direct, task-oriented, and documentation-focused way. Requests are explicit, deadlines are clearly stated and replies often emphasize what has been decided or what should happen next. In routine operational exchanges, this style is efficient and effective because it reduces ambiguity and keeps coordination moving. Also, it sets a strong standard for explicitness that not every counterpart follows in the same way.

4.1 Germany and Vietnam

The Germany-Vietnam exchanges are comparatively smooth. The Vietnamese side generally mirrors the German preference for concise, task-focused communication, but does so within a more polite and relationship-aware frame. Messages often begin or end with expressions of thanks, appreciation, or respectful acknowledgment, yet the operational content remains short and practical. Examples include *"Well noted your information. Thank you"* (GER-VIE-02) and *"Thanks for your checking and feedback"* (GER-VIE-03) which appear frequently in the Vietnamese responses, even in short operational emails. These expressions of gratitude and acknowledgment serve as relationship-maintenance tools and reflect the collectivist, harmony-oriented communication style typical of the Vietnamese workplace culture. By contrast, the German side uses minimal politeness markers. Responses are often brief and limited to essential information, as seen in GER-VIE-02: *"confirmed. Cargo has been delivered on 28.01.2026."*

The Vietnamese side seems to have learned that concise communication is useful in asynchronous work, especially across time zones, while still preserving forms of politeness that signal respect. The result is a communication pattern that is mostly functional and low in conflict. Vietnamese tend to be task-oriented, but they frame requests in a slightly more indirect and polite way. Rather than stating problems directly, the Vietnamese team often softens their messages before raising an issue. For example, in GER-VIE-02, the request for an alternative trucking solution begins with: *"It would be nice if you can help us review and share any potential solutions."* (GER-VIE-02). This phrasing shows preference for maintaining harmony and avoiding direct confrontation, which is consistent with the high-context communication patterns described in the literature.

When it comes to clarification requests and information gaps, several exchanges demonstrate a pattern in which the Vietnamese team proactively seeks clarification or guidance before acting rather than proceeding independently. In GER-VIE-04, for example, the Vietnamese colleague explicitly states, *"I don't know how to work on this. If the action needs to be taken from our side, please help guide me the steps to proceed on Log-Net."* (GER-VIE-04). This reflects a degree of uncertainty avoidance and a preference for receiving clear instructions before moving forward, a pattern pointing to a higher power distance orientation, in which the Vietnamese team positions itself as subordinate and looks to the German side for direction.

In response, the German colleague provides a concise, numbered step-by-step guide that resolves the information gap efficiently. The Vietnamese team then confirms completion without further discussion: *"I have been able to delete the PO on Log-Net, I will proceed for the remaining POs and create User Guide Line."* (GER-VIE-04). This exchange illustrates a functional but asymmetric communication dynamic, where the German side leads and the Vietnamese side follow and confirms.

In cases of indirect, high context problem framing, one of the more complex exchanges, GER-VIE-05, illustrates how the Vietnamese team addresses a sensitive operational issue, a time-consuming and inefficient process, without criticizing the existing system directly. The Vietnamese colleague carefully frames the problem, first confirming the German colleague's understanding, and then adds his own perspective: *"Yes, it's a challenge to keep all of data correct on Log-Net."* (GER-VIE-05). A solution is then indirectly proposed, framed as a suggestion rather than a demand. This approach reflects a conflict-avoidant communication style in which criticism is embedded in constructive proposals to preserve professional relationships.

Both sides use politeness markers, but the Vietnamese side uses them more consistently. Examples include *"Well noted your information. Thank you"* (GER-VIE-02) and *"Thanks for your checking and feedback"* (GER-VIE-03) appear frequently in the Vietnamese responses, even in short operational emails. These expressions of gratitude and acknowledgment serve as relationship-maintenance tools and reflect the collectivist, harmony-oriented communication style typical of the Vietnamese workplace culture.

By contrast, the German side uses minimal politeness markers. Responses are often brief and limited to essential information, as seen in GER-VIE-02: *"confirmed. Cargo has been delivered on 28.01.2026."* Although it is not considered rude in the German cultural context, where efficiency and clarity are valued over relational language, this lack of elaboration can create an imbalance in tone compared to the more detailed responses from the Vietnamese side.

Overall, Germany-Vietnam relations are characterized by functional and largely smooth communication. The most notable cultural difference lies in the degree of directness and the use of relational language. The Germans tend to be more transactional, while the Vietnamese are more attentive to politeness and saving face. Misunderstandings between these two countries tend to be operational rather than interpersonal and often stem from information gaps rather than fundamentally different communication styles.

4.2 Germany and India

The Germany-India exchanges are more ambiguous. Here, the Indian side shows a wider range of communicative behavior depending on the situation. In routine operational matters, the messages can be short and practical. In negotiation, billing disputes, or other relationship-sensitive contexts, however, the Indian side often becomes more indirect, more explanatory, and more context-dependent. In some exchanges, positions are not stated explicitly in the body of the email but are moved to attachments, verbal calls, or future discussions. At other times, the same issue is revisited several times, which suggests that agreement in writing has not been fully reached even when the German side considers the matter closed.

Three recurring patterns stand out most strongly. First, differences in explicitness create friction. The German side expects relevant details to be stated clearly, while the Indian side sometimes assume shared background knowledge or rely on shorter acknowledgments. Second, responsibility is understood differently. The German side tends to define responsibilities and hierarchies narrowly, e.g. approval of a detailed container load plan submitted by Company J is confirmed in a single sentence: *"yes, the planning is approved." (*GER-IND-09) The Indian side is more likely to continue advocating for a client or partner even after a refusal has been communicated (*"Please find attached our counter proposal.")* (GER-IND-05*).* Third, urgency and response time are framed differently. The German side uses deadlines and concrete time frames, while the Indian side sometimes uses repeated intensifiers such as urgent or very urgent to push action forward. GER-IND-01 contains some of the most emphatic language in the entire dataset. Examples in Indian emails include *"This is very very urgent," "Pls update it's urgent,"* and *"required immediate delivery."*.

Conflict handling is another important difference. In Germany-Vietnam communication, possible tension is softened through indirect framing and constructive suggestions. In Germany-India communication, conflict is more visible and more persistent. Billing disputes, storage charges, and delivery delays are discussed across multiple email turns without immediate resolution. The German side prefers factual closure; the Indian side often continues to seek alternative outcomes or exceptions. These exchanges show that misunderstandings are not mainly caused by weak English or simple errors. They emerge from different assumptions about what a business email should do: document a decision, negotiate a position, preserve a relationship, or all three at once. In urgent cases, however, Indian partners depart from being polite in conflicts, as shown in GER-IND-02: *"Once again! If the consignee warehouse is closed, it's closed. There is NOTHING we can do about it!"*

5. Conclusions and Implications

A main conclusion is that intercultural email communication is successful when the parties share not only a common language, but also a workable understanding of what a message is supposed to accomplish. In the present case, the German side consistently communicates from a low-context, highly explicit, and transactional standpoint. The Vietnamese side adapts to that style while preserving respectful relational cues. The Indian side combines relationship maintenance with a more variable use of directness and indirectness, which creates both flexibility and friction. This means that the issue is not simply "German versus Asian communication," but a specific interaction between organizational role, relationship type and national communication norms.

Table 2: Summary of key findings and implications

Key Finding	Cultural Difference Observed	Impact on Collaboration	Main Implication
German emails were direct and task-focused	Low-context, efficiency-oriented communication	Messages were sometimes perceived as abrupt or impersonal	Encourage clearer yet more relationship-sensitive communication
Vietnamese communication was indirect and formal	High-context style with strong hierarchy awareness	German colleagues occasionally perceived messages as vague	Train teams to interpret indirectness as politeness rather than inefficiency
Indian emails balanced politeness and flexibility	Relationship-oriented communication with hierarchical sensitivity	Expectations regarding clarity and structure differed	Establish shared standards for email structure and task communication
Different understandings of politeness created misunderstandings	Conciseness vs. relational wording	Clarification loops and frustration occurred	Develop common intercultural communication guidelines
Hierarchy influenced communication behavior	Asian teams communicated more cautiously with headquarters	Concerns and disagreements were sometimes communicated indirectly	Foster psychologically safe communication environments
Lack of nonverbal cues intensified misunderstandings	Tone and urgency were interpreted differently across cultures	Neutral emails could appear rude or dismissive	Use synchronous communication for sensitive topics
Cultural awareness improved communication quality	Adaptive communicators reduced misunderstandings	Collaboration became smoother and more efficient	Invest in intercultural competence development

Key Finding	Cultural Difference Observed	Impact on Collaboration	Main Implication
Shared English did not guarantee shared understanding	Meaning depends on cultural interpretation, not only language	Misalignment persisted despite good language proficiency	Treat intercultural competence as a strategic organizational capability

Source: Authors' analysis of empirical email data. The interpretation of observed cultural communication patterns is informed by the theoretical framework and literature presented in Table 1.

For practitioners, the findings point to several concrete implications. First, internal emails in cross-cultural settings should make the purpose of the message unmistakable. This includes explicit subject lines, stated deadlines, clear ownership, and a brief explanation of why the request matters. Second, when a refusal or boundary is communicated, the sender should avoid assuming that silence means acceptance. A short confirmation request can prevent misunderstandings. Third, relationship-sensitive exchanges benefit from a slightly warmer tone, especially when the counterpart is an external partner whose cooperation depends on mutual trust. Fourth, cultural awareness should be treated as a communication skill, not as a soft add-on. The emails in this study show that many tensions could be reduced if both sides had a clearer picture of how the other side uses indirectness, politeness, and repetition.

At a strategic level, the findings support targeted intercultural training for global teams, especially for employees who regularly work across headquarters-subsidiary boundaries. Such training should not stereotype national cultures, but should help employees read email more carefully, ask better clarification questions, and adapt style without losing clarity. In that sense, cultural intelligence is not about becoming less direct or more polite in a generic way. It is about selecting the right level of explicitness and relational care for the relationship at hand. The study therefore suggests that effective global collaboration depends as much on communicative flexibility as on technical expertise.

6. Limitations

This study has several limitations. It is based on one organizational setting, which means that the findings cannot be generalized to all German-Asian communication contexts. The dataset is also relatively small and focused on operational email communication, so it does not capture every possible type of interaction, such as informal chat, video meetings, or face-to-face negotiation. In addition, the coding was carried out by a single researcher with supervisory support, so the analysis does not include formal intercoder reliability testing. Finally, the interviews were selective and context-specific, which means they provide valuable interpretation but not a comprehensive account of all perspectives within the organization.

Despite these limitations, the study offers a useful close-up view of how cultural differences become visible in real business emails. Its value lies less in statistical generalization than in the detailed explanation of how communication works when coordination, hierarchy, and relationship management meet across borders.

Ethics Declaration: No ethics declaration is required for this study. All informant data have been anonymized and are not identifiable in the paper or its supporting materials. The study does not disclose any personal or sensitive information, and no rights or interests of the informants are violated.

AI Declaration: The authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to support language editing, including grammar, wording, phrasing and readability of the manuscript. Both authors are non-native English speakers. AI was used only for language refinement and did not contribute to the research design, data analysis, interpretation of findings, generation of references, or substantive academic arguments. All AI-assisted suggestions were reviewed and, where appropriate, revised by the authors. The authors remain fully responsible for the content and accuracy of the manuscript.

References

Al-Khatib, Mahmoud A. (2021): (Im)politeness in intercultural email communication between people of different cultural backgrounds: A case study of Jordan and the USA. In Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 50*(4), 409–430

Bowen, Glenn A. (2009): Document analysis as a qualitative research method. In Qualitative research journal 9 (2), pp. 27–40.

Byron, Kristin (2008): Carrying too heavy a load? The communication and miscommunication of emotion by email: Academy of Management Briarcliff Manor, NY (33). In Academy of Management Review (2).

Dalglish, Sarah L.; Khalid, Hina; McMahon, Shannon A. (2020): Document analysis in health policy research: the READ approach. In Health policy and planning 35 (10), pp. 1424–1431.

Fulmer, C. Ashley; Crosby, Brandon; Gelfand, Michele J. (2014): 4 Cross-cultural perspectives on time. In Time and Work, Volume 2: How time impacts groups, organizations and methodological choices, p. 53.

Gilbert, Eric (2012): Phrases that signal workplace hierarchy. In : Proceedings of the ACM 2012 conference on computer supported cooperative work, pp. 1037–1046.

Hall, Edward T. (1976): Beyond culture: Anchor.

Hofstede, Geert (2011): Dimensionalizing cultures: The Hofstede model in context. In Online readings in psychology and culture 2 (1), p. 8.

Hofstede, Geert; Hofstede, Gert Jan; Minkov, Michael (2010): Cultures and organizations: software of the mind: intercultural cooperation and its importance for survival: McGraw-Hill.

Hofweber, Julia; Jaworska, Sylvia (2022): Polite impoliteness? How power, gender and language background shape request strategies in English as a Business Lingua Franca (BELF) in corporate email exchanges. In Journal of English as a Lingua Franca 11 (2), pp. 223–253.

Holtbrügge, Dirk; Weldon, Abigail; Rogers, Helen (2013): Cultural determinants of email communication styles. In International Journal of Cross Cultural Management 13 (1), pp. 89–110.

Kankaanranta, Marja; Salminen, Leena Louhiala (2013): What language does global business speak?-The concept and development of BELF. In Ibérica: Revista de la Asociación Europea de Lenguas Para Fines Específicos (AELFE) (26), pp. 17–34.

Liu, Ping & Liu, Huiying (2023): Interpersonal strategies in international business emails: The intercultural pragmatics perspective. Intercultural Pragmatics, 20(5), pp. 557-579.

Lim, Hajin; Cosley, Dan; Fussell, Susan R. (2022): Understanding cross-lingual pragmatic misunderstandings in email communication. In Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction 6 (CSCW1), pp. 1–32.

Louhiala-Salminen, Leena; Kankaanranta, Anne (2012): Language as an issue in international internal communication: English or local language? If English, what English? In Public Relations Review 38 (2), pp. 262–269.

Moon, Chanki (2023): Cultural variations in politeness strategies used in email communication. In : Intercultural communication for the global business professional: Routledge, pp. 45–57.

Müller-Frommeyer, Lena C.; Kauffeld, Simone (2021): Gaining insights into organizational communication dynamics through the analysis of implicit and explicit communication. In Gruppe. Interaktion. Organisation. Zeitschrift für Angewandte Organisationspsychologie (GIO) 52 (1), pp. 173–183.

Park, Sanghee, Jeon, Jihyeon , Shim, Eunsook (2021): Exploring request emails in English for business purposes: A move analysis. In English for Specific Purposes*,* 63, pp. 137–150.

Tanaka, Kiyoyasu (2023): What hinders digital communication? Evidence from foreign firms in Japan. Japan and the world economy, *66*, pp. 101190.

Tenzer, Helene; Pudelko, Markus (2017): The influence of language differences on power dynamics in multinational teams. In Journal of World Business 52 (1), pp. 45–61.

Thomas, David C.; Peterson, Mark F. (2016): Cross-cultural management: Essential concepts: Sage Publications.

Ting-Toomey, Stella; Chung, Leeva C. (2005): Understanding intercultural communication: Oxford University Press New York (28).

Yadav, Beauty (2025): Digital Correspondence: Formal and Informal. In : Digital Landscape: Communication in the 21st Century: Springer, pp. 297–315.