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Cultural Differences in International Business Communication Challenges and Strategic Responses

University of Wales Trinity Saint David

International Business Communications LCBB6023

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1. Introduction



(Alzamora, 2024)

International business increasingly depends on effective communication across cultures, making understanding national cultural differences a strategic necessity for managers.

The contrast between Italian (Mediterranean, high-context, relationship-oriented) culture and British (Northern European, relatively low-context, task- and procedure-oriented) culture provides a rich basis to explore how communication styles, values, and expectations shape business interactions (Passport to Trade, 2019).

A central problem is that the same behaviour (such as indirectness, silence, or small talk) may be interpreted very differently by Italian and British professionals, leading to misunderstanding, mistrust, and inefficient meetings in multinational organizations.

The objective of this essay is to critically analyse how cultural differences between Italian and British business contexts affect communication in international meetings and to examine how international managers can mitigate these barriers through strategic approaches.

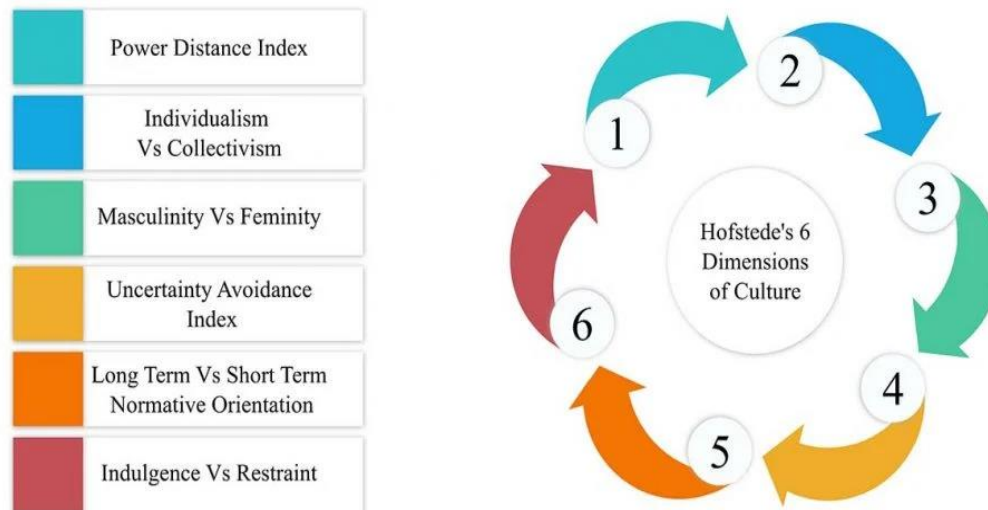
Drawing on key theories such as Hofstede's cultural dimensions, the notion of Business English as a *Lingua Franca* (BELF), and intercultural communication scholars including Samovar and Giménez, the essay links academic perspectives to real-world corporate practice.

The structure is as follows:

- First, a **literature review** outlines core theoretical frameworks and definitions.
- Second, the **main analysis** applies these frameworks to Italian British business interactions, highlighting communication challenges, case-based illustrations, and managerial strategies.
- Finally, the **conclusion** synthesizes key insights and reflects on implications for international managers' language and cultural competence.

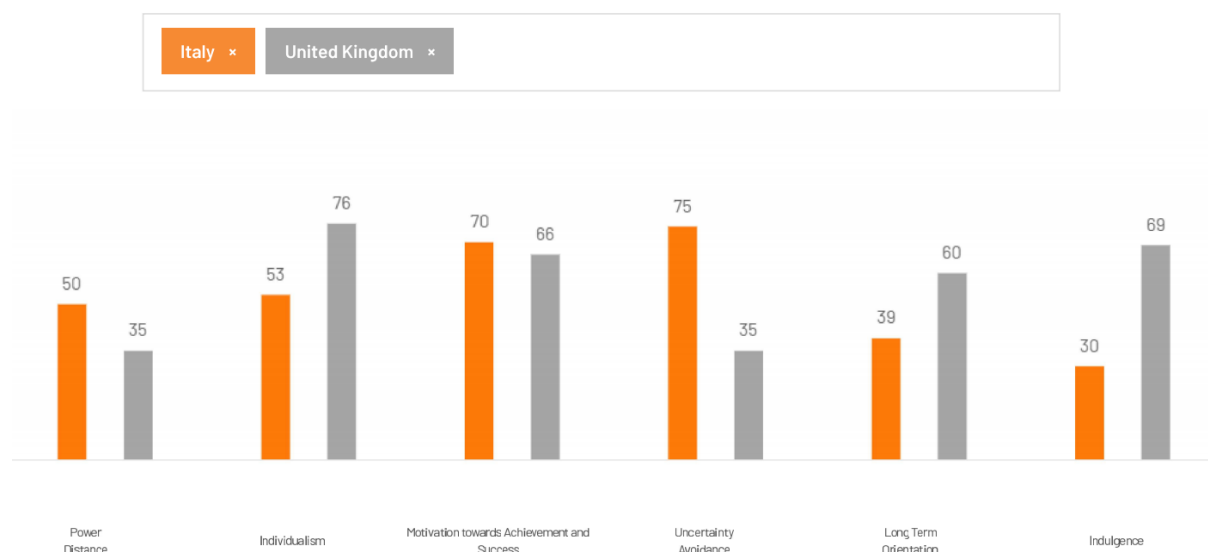
2. Literature review

Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory remains a widely used framework for comparing national cultures along dimensions such as Individualism - Collectivism, Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Masculinity - Femininity, and Long-term Orientation (Nickerson, 2025).



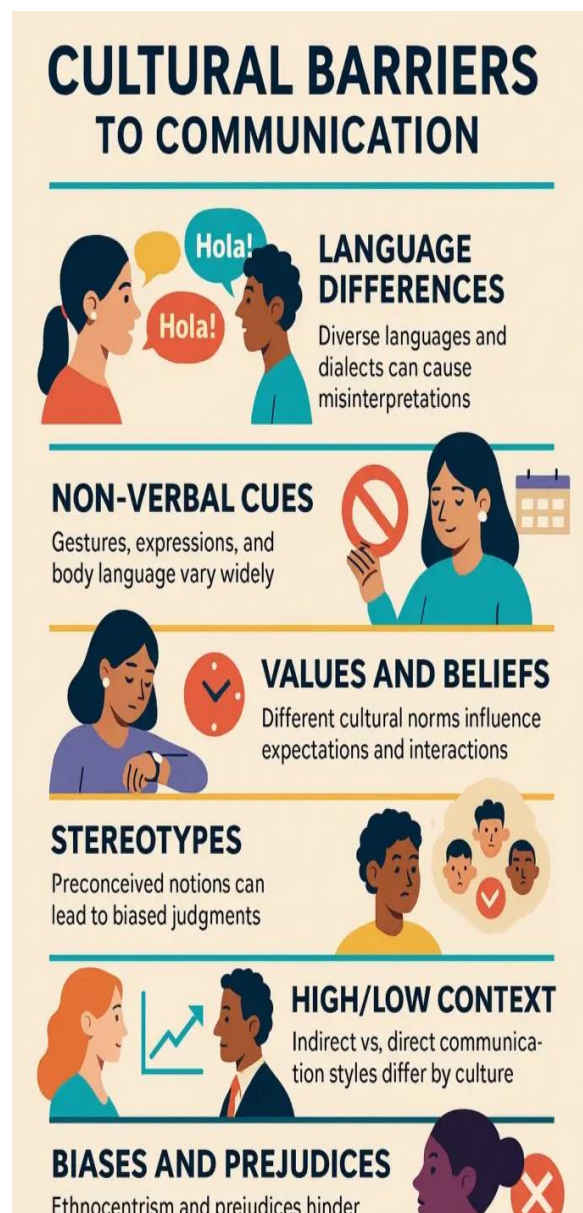
(Simplypsychology.org, 2024)

Italian and British cultures are often portrayed as similarly individualistic but differ in uncertainty avoidance, with Italy tending toward higher uncertainty avoidance and more reliance on relationships and flexibility, while the UK typically shows lower uncertainty avoidance and stronger emphasis on rules, contracts, and formal procedures. Hofstede's framework is useful for highlighting systematic patterns, yet it has been criticised for essentialising national cultures and underestimating intra-cultural variation (The Culture Factor, 2020).



Another important concept is Business English as a *Lingua Franca* (BELF), which focuses on how non-native and native speakers use English as a shared resource in international workplaces.

In BELF contexts, the goal is not adherence to native-speaker norms but effective, cooperative meaning-making among diverse users. This is particularly relevant where British managers may assume their native variety of English is the default standard while Italian partners may legitimately adapt English pragmatically, for example, through simplified grammar, directness, or hybrid forms. BELF research emphasises that communication breakdowns often stem less from language “errors” and more from differing pragmatic expectations, power relations, and attitudes to accommodation. **intext**



Intercultural communication scholars such as Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel stress that culture heavily shapes both Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication, including high vs low Context, Paralanguage, and Time Orientation (Samovar, n.d.).

Mediterranean cultures like Italy are frequently characterised as higher-context, where meaning is conveyed through relational cues, shared history, and non-verbal signals, while Northern European cultures such as Britain are often more low-context, with greater reliance on explicit verbal messages and written documentation.

Giménez and other business communication scholars also underline the importance of **Genre** and discourse **Practices** in multinational companies, noting how meeting formats, turn-taking, and email conventions embed cultural assumptions about hierarchy, decision-making, and politeness (Gimenez, 2023).

In cross-cultural business communication, employees and partners are active interpreters whose cultural frames shape how corporate messages, strategies, or meeting agendas are received.

Overall, the literature converges on several key concepts for this essay: Cultural Value Dimensions, High- vs Low-context communication, BELF, and Intercultural Competence as a managerial capability that involves self-awareness, empathy, and adaptive communication strategies

3. Italian vs British cultural profiles

Applying Hofstede, both Italy and the UK are commonly described as individualistic societies, but they differ in other dimensions that matter for communication.



Italians are often seen as more comfortable with hierarchy in practice yet rely heavily on personal relationships and informal networks, whereas British organizations may emphasise formal structures, role definitions, and procedural fairness. In meetings, this can translate into Italians putting strong weight on trust-building, informal conversation, and flexible negotiation of outcomes, while British participants may prioritise clear agendas, timekeeping, and documented decisions. These tendencies are not absolute but influence expectations of what a “professional” meeting should look like (Commisceo Global, 2021).

Contexting styles deepen this contrast. Italian business communication tends to be more high context, with greater use of indirect hints, overlapping talk, expressive intonation, and non-verbal cues such as gestures and eye contact. British communication is relatively lower context: meanings are more often encoded explicitly in words, understatement is a common politeness strategy, and emotional restraint is valued in professional settings.

For example, an Italian manager’s animated discussion and interruptions may be intended as engagement and commitment, whereas a British manager may interpret the same behaviour as disorderly or domineering. On the other hand, British understatement or hedged criticism (“perhaps we might reconsider this”) can be read by Italians as a weak or non-committal message, producing misaligned expectations (Elenafoulkes.com, 2017).

4. Communication practices in international meetings

Italian - British business meetings often encounter **three main friction points**.

First, time management differs significantly: British managers view agendas as binding roadmaps with strict schedules, while Italians treat them as flexible guidelines, prioritizing relationships over punctuality. This creates mutual perceptions of disorganization versus rigidity.



Second, communication styles clash. Italians use overlapping speech and extended discussion to show engagement, whereas British norms emphasize turn-taking and systematic progression. Italians may interrupt enthusiastically, which British participants view as impolite. Conversely, British indirect disagreement through questions or hedges appears too subtle for Italians expecting explicit conflict negotiation.

Third, decision-making processes diverge. Italian firms, particularly traditional or family-owned ones, centralize authority in senior figures who decide after extensive discussion. British organizations favor consensus-building and documented procedures with distributed input. Without addressing these differences, participants may leave meetings with conflicting assumptions about agreements reached (Business Culture, 2013).

5. Language, BELF, and perceived competence

Language plays a central role, especially when English is used as the *Lingua Franca*.

British participants may unconsciously position themselves as linguistic gatekeepers, expecting native-speaker norms and equating fluent, idiomatic English with professional competence. Italian professionals, even those with high proficiency, may use English strategically, simplifying syntax, borrowing Italian discourse markers, or directly translating idioms. Misjudging this pragmatic BELF use as lack of competence can create unjust power asymmetries and reduce Italians' willingness to contribute to meetings.

At the same time, Italian speakers may perceive British idiomatic expressions, humour, or culturally specific references as obscure or exclusionary.



(artpictures, 2023)

For instance, British irony, self-deprecation, or indirect criticism can be lost on Italian colleagues, who may misinterpret the severity of feedback or the seriousness of a proposal. This highlights that language competency is not only about vocabulary and grammar but also about pragmatic and cultural literacy: knowing how humour, small talk, praise, and criticism function in British business discourse, and conversely, understanding Italian preferences for more elaborate personal conversation and expressive style before shifting to task-focused talk (Beaty, 2024).

BELF research suggests that successful international meetings often involve mutual accommodation rather than one-sided adaptation to the native speaker. Strategies include slowing down speech, avoiding culture-specific idioms, using explicit signposting (“there are three points”), and checking comprehension without causing loss of face (Thinkinitalian.com, 2023).

A British manager who consciously adapts their English and explicitly invites contributions from Italian colleagues helps redistribute communicative power and build trust. Similarly, Italian managers who prepare key points in concise English, agree on terminology in advance, and signal when they are switching from relational talk to decision talk can reduce ambiguity.

6. Real-world business examples

Italian and British business communication styles often clash in multinational settings. British employees at Italian companies report frustration with informal decision-making and last-minute changes, while Italian headquarters view British formal procedures as overly bureaucratic. These differences reflect contrasting cultural approaches to flexibility and authority.

In Anglo-Italian joint ventures, many strategic conflicts are actually communication issues. British managers' careful emails appear vague to Italians, while Italian phone discussions seem insufficiently formal to British colleagues expecting written documentation. Hybrid protocols, combining Italian - preferred calls with British - preferred written minutes, successfully reduce tensions.

The luxury fashion sector illustrates these challenges clearly. Italian creative directors communicate through metaphor and emotion, while British marketers require explicit, measurable objectives. Without translation between these styles, miscommunication occurs.

Organizations using bilingual liaison roles and cross-cultural training achieve smoother collaboration, as intermediaries learn to translate both language and communication expectations between cultures.

7. Strategic approaches for international managers

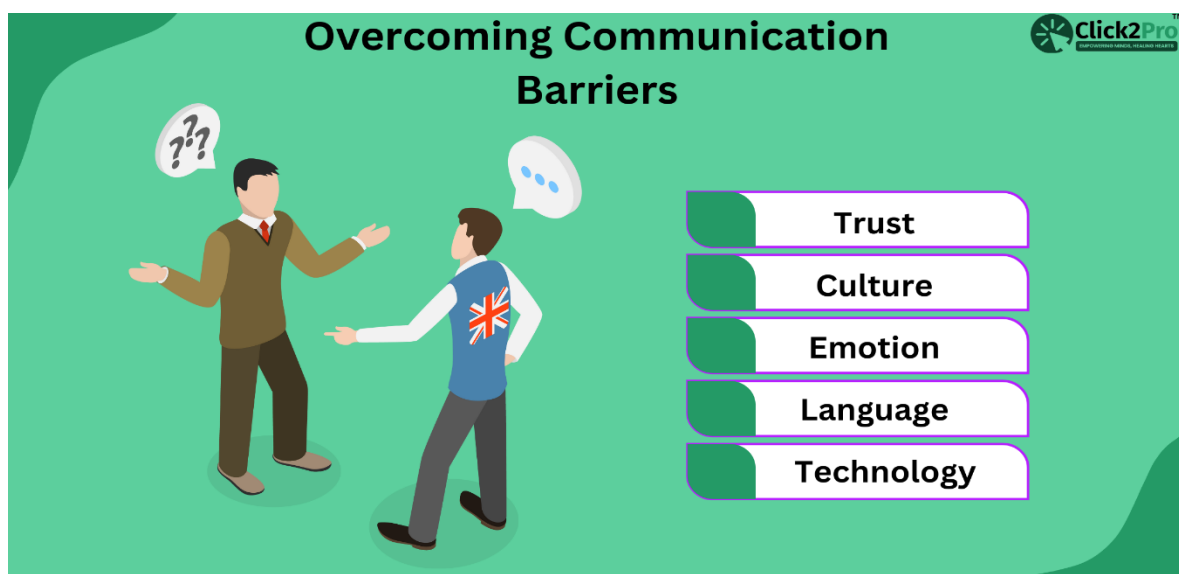
International managers operating in Italian - British settings can deploy several strategic approaches during meetings to overcome cultural barriers.

First, they can explicitly negotiate meeting norms at the outset.

This involves agreeing on how strictly to follow the agenda, how decisions will be recorded, and how much time will be allocated to relationship-building talk versus task discussion. Making norms explicit reduces the risk that one side sees the other's practices as disrespectful or incompetent.

Second, managers can practise adaptive leadership communication by consciously shifting along the high-low context variety.

When working with Italian colleagues, British managers may need to invest more in informal pre-meeting conversations, use richer non-verbal cues, and tolerate more flexible turn-taking. With British colleagues, Italian managers may benefit from presenting information in a more structured way, using clear signposting and summarising decisions in writing immediately after meetings. The key is neither to "abandon" one's cultural style nor to stereotype the other side but to expand one's behavioural repertoire.



Third, investing in language and cultural training pays off.

BELF-oriented training can help native English speakers become aware of their own idiomatic usage and power advantages in meetings, encouraging more inclusive linguistic practices. Italian managers can be supported to develop meeting-specific English, including phrases for signalling disagreement politely, asking for clarification, and summarising agreements. Cultural competency training can go beyond static dimensions to include critical reflection on power, identity, and stereotypes, helping managers avoid simplistic “Italians are emotional, British are cold” narratives.

Fourth, structural tools can support communication.

These include using shared visual aids (slides, charts, live documents) to anchor discussion, recording action points in real time on screen, and rotating meeting chairs between Italian and British participants. Such practices reduce reliance on implicit context and improve transparency. Hybrid communication protocols, mixing synchronous (face-to-face or video) interaction with asynchronous written follow-up, allow both high-context relational cues and low-context clarity to coexist.

Finally, cultivating intercultural mindsets is essential.

Effective international managers display curiosity, tolerance of ambiguity, and the willingness to treat miscommunication as a learning opportunity rather than a personal failing. They actively seek feedback on their communication from colleagues in other cultures and model humility by acknowledging when cultural assumptions have led to misunderstanding (Wharton, 2021).

This reflective stance helps teams normalise the fact that, in Italian - British and other cross-cultural settings, friction is not a sign of incompetence but an invitation to refine shared practices.

8. Conclusion

The comparison between Italian and British cultures shows how deeply cultural values and communication styles shape international business interactions, especially in meetings where decisions and relationships are negotiated simultaneously.

Italian high-context, relationship-oriented communication and British relatively low-context, procedure-oriented communication each bring strengths, but they also create potential for misinterpretation around time, agenda use, turn-taking, and decision-making. Language adds another layer, as BELF dynamics and native-speaker norms affect perceptions of competence and voice.

For international managers, the implications are both practical and ethical. Success in Italian - British business contexts require more than technical expertise; it demands language awareness, cultural reflexivity, and the ability to design communicative environments that value both relational richness and clarity.

Strategic approaches, such as negotiating meeting norms, practising adaptive communication, investing in BELF and cultural training, and using structural supports, enable managers to transform cultural differences from sources of breakdown into resources for creativity and innovation.

Ultimately, cultivating intercultural competence allows managers not only to prevent costly misunderstandings but also to build more inclusive, resilient, and effective international teams.

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