

## Disparities in Language Competence and Conflict: The Moderating Role of Cultural Intelligence in Intercultural Interactions

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**Abstract :** Intercultural interactions are becoming increasingly common in organizations and life. These interactions are often the stage of miscommunication and conflict. In management research, these problems are commonly attributed to cultural differences in values and interactional norms. As a result, the notion that intercultural competence can minimize these challenges is widely accepted. Cultural differences, however, are not the only source of a challenge during intercultural interactions. The need to rely on a lingua franca - or common language between people who have different mother tongues - is another important one. In theory, a lingua franca can improve communication and ease coordination. In practice however, disparities in people's ability and confidence to communicate in the language can exacerbate tensions and generate inefficiencies. In this study, we draw on power theory to develop a model of disparities in language competence and conflict in a multicultural work context. Specifically, we hypothesized that differences in language competence between interaction partners would be positively related to conflict such that people would report greater conflict with partners who have more dissimilar levels of language competence and lesser conflict with partners with more similar levels of language competence. Furthermore, we proposed that cultural intelligence (CQ) an intercultural competence that denotes an individual's capability to be effective in intercultural situations, would weaken the relationship between disparities in language competence and conflict such that people would report less conflict with partners who have more dissimilar levels of language competence when the interaction partner has high CQ and more conflict when the partner has low CQ. We tested this model with a sample of 135 undergraduate students working in multicultural teams for 13 weeks. We used a round-robin design to examine conflict in 646 dyads nested within 21 teams. Results of analyses using social relations modeling provided support for our hypotheses. Specifically, we found that in intercultural dyads with large disparities in language competence, partners with the lowest level of language competence would report higher levels of interpersonal conflict. However, this relationship disappeared when the partner with higher language competence was also high in CQ. These findings suggest that communication in a lingua franca can be a source of conflict in intercultural collaboration when partners differ in their level of language competence and that CQ can alleviate these effects during collaboration with partners who have relatively lower levels of language competence. Theoretically, this study underscores the benefits of CQ as a complement to language competence for intercultural effectiveness. Practically, these results further attest to the benefits of investing resources to develop language competence and CQ in employees engaged in multicultural work.

**Keywords :** cultural intelligence, intercultural interactions, language competence, multicultural teamwork

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