



Fostering Student Engagement in International Business Education: A Cross-Cultural, Multi-Level Framework for Innovative Teaching and Learning

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Abstract. Business schools face a difficult instructional challenge. They must prepare students for global work while teaching across languages, cultures, technologies, and uneven institutional conditions. Innovative teaching methods such as artificial intelligence tools, simulations, blended learning, design thinking, service learning, virtual exchange, and international experiential programs have gained attention for their ability to increase participation and connect classroom concepts to professional practice. Yet these methods do not automatically produce engagement. They work only when educators adapt them to the cultural expectations, linguistic needs, and institutional realities of the learners they serve. This article develops a cross-cultural, multilevel framework to foster student engagement in international business education. Drawing from recent scholarship on business pedagogy, curriculum internationalization, adaptive learning, cross-cultural instructional design, and international exchange, the article argues that engagement emerges through the alignment of five elements: institutional support, culturally responsive design, experiential learning, intercultural communication, and reflective adaptation. The proposed framework shifts the conversation from adopting innovative tools to designing culturally situated learning systems. It contributes to international business education by explaining how innovative pedagogy becomes meaningful when instructors connect it to students' cultural identities, real-world business problems, and the development of global competence.

Keywords: student engagement, international business education, innovative teaching, cross-cultural pedagogy, experiential learning, intercultural competence

1 Introduction

International business education has entered a period in which traditional teaching approaches no longer meet the demands placed on graduates. Students must learn how to interpret global markets, communicate across cultures, work in digitally mediated teams, and apply theory to uncertain business problems. It requires more than

knowledge acquisition. It requires engagement, judgment, adaptability, and the ability to learn with and from people whose cultural assumptions may differ from one's own.

Innovative teaching methods have emerged as an important response to this challenge. Business educators increasingly use AI-supported platforms, simulations, flipped classrooms, blended formats, design thinking, service learning, virtual exchange, and real-world projects to make learning more active, applied, and professionally relevant. In the context of Chinese business schools, active learning, AI-driven platforms, and simulation-based lessons can improve student motivation and engagement by helping students connect business concepts to practical decision-making [12]. However, these methods must align with local educational culture. Because many students in China have been shaped by teacher-centered and test-oriented learning environments, the shift toward participatory pedagogy requires careful adaptation rather than simple adoption.

This insight frames the article's larger argument. Although innovative teaching methods matter, they do not operate in isolation. A simulation may deepen learning or confuse students; a virtual exchange may build intercultural competence or remain a surface-level conversation; and AI tools may personalize learning or create dependency. The difference depends on design, culture, facilitation, and institutional support. Student engagement reflects the interaction between learner behavior and the learning environment rather than the effect of any single instructional technique [11]. Similarly, blended learning improves outcomes when instructors intentionally incorporate it into a coherent learning design. When technology functions merely as an add-on, its contribution to learning remains limited [4].

This article proposes a cross-cultural, multi-level framework for fostering engagement in international business education. The framework incorporates the following components: pedagogical innovation (using new teaching methods and technology), culturally responsive design (adapting instruction to cultural norms), institutional support (resources and support from the institution), experiential learning (practical, real-world experiences), and intercultural competence development (building skills for effective cross-cultural interaction). It synthesizes recent articles on cross-cultural pedagogy and international education, along with additional peer-reviewed sources. The goal is not to promote one method as superior. Instead, the article explains how innovative teaching becomes engaging when it aligns with cultural context, instructional design, institutional capacity, real-world application, and the development of intercultural competence.

2 Innovative Teaching and the Limits of Tool-Centered Reform

Much of the recent discussion about business education centers on instructional methods. AI platforms, simulations, flipped classrooms, virtual teams, gamification, and blended learning all promise to make instruction more active, responsive, and practice-oriented. These methods are particularly relevant for Chinese business schools because they can move students beyond passive reception and create opportunities for active participation, personalized feedback, and applied analysis [12]. This shift is important

because business students need opportunities to practice decision-making, communication, and problem-solving before they enter professional settings.

The strongest studies, however, do not treat innovation as a simple toolkit. Research on blended learning, international collaboration, and pedagogical innovation in management education shows that blended international learning can strengthen cross-cultural communication, ethical reasoning, cognitive flexibility, and adaptive problem-solving [5]. At the same time, these benefits depend on conditions that extend beyond the classroom activity itself. Digital inequity, faculty resistance, infrastructure limitations, and complex course design can all weaken implementation. These challenges suggest that innovation depends on an ecosystem of support rather than the mere presence of new instructional methods.

Recent meta-analytic work on blended learning reinforces this point. Blended learning can improve academic achievement in higher education, but its effects depend on instructional design, implementation quality, and the conditions under which students experience the learning process [4]. The same logic appears in collaborative online international learning. COIL can help internationalize undergraduate business education and develop students' global mindset, but only when faculty coordinate the experience carefully and design purposeful cross-border interaction [7]. This approach also differs from broader virtual exchange because it depends on collaborative, intercultural, and co-designed learning tasks rather than simple online contact between students in different locations [8].

These studies show that engagement stems from meaningful participation, not novelty. Innovative teaching methods succeed when they require students to engage in intellectually and socially significant work, helping them understand why the activity matters, how it connects to course goals, and its relevance to global business practice.

3 Culture as a Condition for Engagement

International business education often assumes that exposure to cultural diversity naturally produces intercultural learning, but the literature does not support that assumption. Cross-cultural education strategies cultivate global awareness when they integrate curriculum, communication practice, international activities, and structured reflection [9]. Global awareness includes cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. Students must understand global issues, value cultural differences, and develop a willingness to act responsibly in international contexts.

This view also applies to Chinese business schools, where innovative teaching methods must be adapted to local classroom expectations rather than transferred without adjustment [12]. Western approaches to active learning often assume that students will readily question instructors, debate peers, and tolerate ambiguity. These assumptions do not always align with educational cultures that emphasize respect for authority, formal learning, and examination performance. Active learning should therefore not be rejected, but its introduction requires careful instructional design, clear expectations, and culturally appropriate facilitation.

A similar argument appears in research on entrepreneurial design thinking, which emphasizes that Western teaching methodologies should not move directly into Eastern higher education contexts without adaptation [3]. Teaching methods must instead be adjusted through a process that considers students, lecturers, university culture, and national learning norms. This framework is important because it treats adaptation as an interpretive process rather than a simple translation. Every teaching method carries assumptions about authority, creativity, failure, time, collaboration, and student agency. These assumptions must be examined and recontextualized before the method can function effectively in another cultural environment.

Curriculum internationalization and service learning add another layer to this discussion by showing that cross-cultural competence develops through intercultural communication skills [16]. Institutional support strengthens the development and application of these skills, which helps explain why many internationalized courses remain weak when they rely only on global content. Exposure to international material does not automatically produce intercultural competence. Students must practice communication, reflection, humility, and collaboration across cultural differences.

The implication for international business education is direct. Culture must become part of instructional design. Faculty should ask how students understand participation, what forms of communication feel safe, how peer critique operates, how authority shapes discussion, and how students interpret uncertainty. Engagement grows when instructors design with these cultural questions in mind.

4 Instructional Design for Diverse Global Classrooms

A cross-cultural approach to engagement must move beyond broad calls for diversity and specify how learning environments should be designed. Cross-cultural instructional design requires integrating multilingual education, interdisciplinary teaching, culturally responsive content, technology, and inclusive assessment [1]. This approach is especially relevant for international business education because business classrooms often include students from different language backgrounds, academic traditions, and disciplinary orientations.

Language plays a central role. Students may understand business concepts but hesitate to speak because they lack confidence in the instructional language. Others may struggle with idioms, culturally specific examples, or fast-paced discussions. When instructors mistake language hesitation for intellectual weakness, they reduce engagement. Multilingual scaffolding can include glossaries, visual explanations, structured discussion prompts, peer rehearsal, translated key terms, and opportunities to connect concepts to students' home contexts. These practices do not reduce academic rigor. They make participation more accessible.

Interdisciplinary design also matters because international business problems rarely fall within a single discipline. A foreign market entry decision may involve culture, economics, law, politics, ethics, supply chains, analytics, and leadership. International education in business is therefore best understood as a multi-level, cross-disciplinary field that connects national economies, multinational organizations, business

disciplines, and scholarship on teaching and learning [13]. This framing prevents engagement from becoming a narrow classroom issue. Engagement in international business education should connect disciplinary knowledge to institutional and organizational realities. This thinking extends into adaptive business education, where learning environments, experiential pathways, and competency development must respond to changing technologies, labor markets, and student needs [2]. However, adaptive business education must also remain culturally situated. In Chinese business schools, AI tools, active learning, and simulations require attention to classroom expectations, faculty readiness, and access to technology [12]. A learning environment cannot be considered fully adaptive if it responds only to performance data while ignoring the cultural context in which students learn.

5 Experiential Learning and Real World Engagement

Experiential learning gives students a reason to invest effort because real problems reveal the practical consequences of business concepts beyond exams. A blended intensive entrepreneurship program that connected students with start-ups, universities, industry actors, and government stakeholders demonstrates this value [10]. Through this type of applied learning experience, students can develop hard skills such as market analysis and international business planning, soft skills such as teamwork and communication, and hybrid skills that combine technical knowledge with interpersonal competence.

The strength of the blended intensive entrepreneurship program lies in its ecosystem view of experiential learning [10]. The university did not simply deliver a course; it acted as a boundary spanner, connecting regional entrepreneurial ecosystems across countries. This model is valuable for international business education because it shows how engagement can emerge through meaningful participation in a larger professional and institutional network. Students become more engaged when their work contributes to companies, communities, and cross-border collaboration.

Service learning offers another pathway for connecting business education with cross-cultural engagement. By fostering empathy, cultural humility, and intercultural communication, service learning helps students understand that managers operate within communities and institutions, not only markets [16]. These outcomes matter because a student who can analyze global strategy but cannot listen across cultural differences remains underprepared for international work.

International exchange can produce a similar transformation when it includes structure and reflection. In an exchange setting involving Vietnamese student and teachers in Thailand, participants adapted their communication, teaching strategies, and classroom management to the new cultural environment [15]. They used gestures, visual aids, translation tools, slower speech, and culturally embedded examples, and these adjustments helped develop empathy, flexibility, and cultural sensitivity. Although this evidence comes from teacher education, it has clear implications for business schools. Students develop intercultural competence when they experience differences, interpret them thoughtfully, and adjust their behavior in response.

Experiential learning, therefore, should not mean activity for its own sake. It should create structured encounters with difference, uncertainty, and consequence. Simulations and AI-supported business learning fit within this broader experiential logic when they help students practice business judgment in culturally relevant ways [12]. Digital platforms and applied learning activities can engage students more deeply when they connect classroom concepts to realistic decisions, local learning expectations, and the cultural contexts in which business problems unfold.

6 Intercultural Competence as the Mechanism

Intercultural competence explains how cross-cultural engagement develops. Classroom diversity climate influences students' ability to build intercultural competence, which means diversity alone does not create learning [14]. Students need classroom conditions that support contact, cooperation, and respect. This point is especially important for business schools, where international team projects may be assigned without sufficient preparation for cultural conflict, communication differences, or unequal participation.

When students have the skills and attitudes needed to process differences productively [6]. This insight matters for international business because innovation often depends on combining perspectives that do not usually meet. A culturally diverse classroom can become a creative environment, but only when instructors help students move beyond exposure toward interpretation, collaboration, and shared problem-solving.

Communication sits at the center of this process. Intercultural communication serves as a bridge between internationalization of the curriculum, service learning, and cross-cultural competence [16]. This bridge becomes visible in exchange-based learning when educators adapt speech, gestures, visuals, and classroom examples to connect with students in unfamiliar cultural settings [15]. In business education, similar communication skills shape negotiation, teamwork, leadership, consulting, and international market analysis.

The engagement mechanism, then, is not simply interest. It is the development of students' capacity to participate across differences. Students engage more deeply when they feel prepared to contribute, recognize their own cultural assumptions, and communicate in ways others can understand. This is why instructional design, reflection, and facilitation matter so much.

7 A Cross-Cultural, Multi-Level Engagement Framework

The literature points toward a multi-level framework with five interacting elements.

The first element is institutional readiness. Business schools need faculty development, digital infrastructure, flexible curriculum policies, language support, and external partnerships. Institutional support shapes the likelihood that innovative teaching will succeed, especially when learning environments require blended collaboration, adaptive pathways, and the development of cross-cultural competence [2, 5, 16]. Without such support, innovation remains dependent on individual faculty effort rather than becoming a sustainable feature of the educational system.

The second element is culturally responsive instructional design. Courses should include culturally relevant cases, multilingual scaffolding, interdisciplinary problems, inclusive assessment, and reflection. Cross-cultural instructional design provides the foundation for this element by showing how diversity must be built into curriculum, pedagogy, learning materials, and assessment practices [1]. In the context of Chinese business schools, this design must also account for teacher-centered traditions, respect for authority, and uneven technology readiness [12].

The third element is pedagogical innovation. AI tools, simulations, flipped classrooms, blended learning, COIL, design thinking, and service learning can all strengthen engagement when they are designed around clear learning goals. They should not appear as isolated techniques. They should form part of a coherent learning sequence.

The fourth element is experiential application. Students need opportunities to apply concepts in real-world business or international contexts. Blended entrepreneurship projects can connect students to companies and stakeholders, while collaborative online international learning can internationalize business education through structured online projects [7, 10]. These approaches help students see the professional relevance of course content by linking classroom learning to authentic organizational, entrepreneurial, and cross-border challenges.

The fifth element is intercultural transformation. Engagement becomes durable when students develop empathy, openness, cultural sensitivity, flexibility in communication, and global awareness. These outcomes are supported by research on global awareness, classroom diversity climate, intercultural competence and creativity, and exchange-based cultural adaptation [6, 9, 14, 15].

These five elements work together. A business simulation may fail if students do not understand expectations. A COIL project may remain shallow if students lack intercultural preparation. A blended course may increase convenience but not engagement if interaction is weak. AI may personalize content, but it cannot form judgment without reflection. Engagement emerges when the elements align.

8 Implications for International Business Educators

The framework suggests several practical implications. First, business schools should incorporate cultural adaptation into course design. Faculty should not import active learning strategies without considering how students interpret participation, error, disagreement, and authority. Instructors can gradually introduce active learning through structured roles, small-group preparation, guided reflection, and clear expectations.

Second, faculty development should combine technological training with intercultural pedagogy. Instructors need to know how to use digital tools and how to facilitate cross-cultural communication. Technology cannot compensate for weak instructional judgment.

Third, business programs should expand real-world learning opportunities. Consulting projects, simulations, service learning, entrepreneurship challenges, and COIL experiences can help students connect theory to practice. These activities should include debriefing and reflection to help students interpret their experiences.

Fourth, the assessment should evaluate both intercultural learning and business knowledge. Students should demonstrate how they analyze cultural context, adapt communication, collaborate across differences, and revise assumptions. This approach aligns with inclusive assessment practices and with the central role of intercultural communication in developing cross-cultural competence [1, 16].

Finally, schools should avoid treating innovation as a universal formula. Evidence from Chinese business education shows that innovative methods can foster engagement, but only when instructors adapt them to local culture, institutional readiness, and student needs [12].

9 Conclusion

Innovative teaching methods have become essential in international business education, but they cannot stand alone. AI-supported learning, simulations, blended courses, design thinking, service learning, COIL, and real-world projects can increase engagement when they form part of a culturally responsive learning system. They lose much of their value when instructors ignore culture, language, institutional support, and reflection.

This article proposed a cross-cultural, multi-level framework for fostering student engagement in international business education. The framework integrates institutional readiness, culturally responsive instructional design, pedagogical innovation, experiential application, and intercultural transformation.

Future research should test this framework across business schools in different regions. Comparative studies could examine how students respond to simulations, AI tools, COIL, and service learning in different cultural contexts. Longitudinal studies could explore whether culturally adaptive engagement improves global competence, ethical reasoning, employability, and leadership readiness. International business education should not pursue innovation for novelty's sake. It should design learning experiences that help students think, communicate, and act responsibly across cultures.

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