

# E-COMMUNICATION INSTRUMENTS IN INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION IN MAINLAND CHINA

**Guo Xiaoxi, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia**  
**Mahani Binti Stapa, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia**  
**Jia Jiannan, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia**

## ABSTRACT

*In intercultural business communication settings, instead of face-to-face communication, much work is done through computer-assisted communication with development of information technology. There are a variety of instruments to be applied in intercultural business communication, such as email, WhatsApp, skype, Google meeting, WebEx and so on. In China, businesspersons would also like to use communication applications such as WeChat. What are the preferences of Chinese business people to conduct intercultural business communication is a question troubling their counterparts. This research aims to examine the computer-assisted communication patterns, tools and effectiveness in intercultural business communication in Mainland China and answer the following questions: (1) what kinds of communication patterns are mostly used by Chinese businesspersons; (2) what are the advantages and disadvantages of each tool in intercultural business communication; & (3) what kind of communication tools are most efficient tools to viewed by Chinese businesspersons in intercultural business communication? The authors hope find the better way for intercultural business communication by interviewing thirty Chinese businesspersons who have business communication experience with people from other cultures. The findings show that Chinese businesspersons prefer to use instant messages together with emails and they think using these tools together can make the communication more effective.*

**Keywords:** Communication Tools, Intercultural Business Communication, Communication Effectiveness

## INTRODUCTION

With the development of information technology & telecommunication technology, intercultural business communication is not limited to face-to-face communication only; but communication through various communication applications is more commonly seen in today's workplace. E-communication in business has become the popular topic of recent researches (Kock, 2002; Vershitskaya & Vilchinskaya, 2013). Besides, the covid-19 epidemic has serious impact on personal life & economic of all the countries in the world, which is a great challenge for individual, society & business entitles. Face-to-face communication seems even impossible between people from different countries because of the lockdown of countries & massive quarantines (Pejić-Bach, 2021). Electronic communication is heavily relied on to keep virtually contact & keep running business. Literally, it is electronic communication that makes sure the continuous operation of business in the world & enable the survival of majority businesses. Hence, new aspects and content emerge to be studied due to the widely usage of electronic communication in business field, especially in intercultural business communication in the era of Covid-19 crises.

Effective communication is needed even on the basic level of performance (Lojeski & Reilly, 2008). Hence, it is reasonable to make it clear that what communication tools are available and preferred for the counterparts in order to make the communication more effective.

China, as a major country with rapid economic development attracts business from other countries in the world. No country nor serious multinational can ignore China for its huge market potential, cheap source of labor and low cost structure (Leung, 2008). Hence, business communication with Chinese employees is increasingly common for businesspersons from other countries. How to communicate with Chinese employees effectively becomes an issue around the world. This paper analyzes what Chinese employees' preferred method of intercultural business communication is and what the effective way to communicate with Chinese employees is.

The electronic communication instruments in business field can be divided into three types: one is video communication services: web-based presentation tools including Zomo.com, Google meeting.com, Webex.com, etc.; one is written communication services email; the other type is instant message services including WhatsApp, WeChat, Skype & so on. Video communication provides the opportunity to continue business in a kind of face-to-face way with flexible time & location. Written communication makes the work more convenient & faster. Instant message services combine both the characteristic of written communication & spoken communication (Baron, 2009). All the communication instruments, with widely availability & equitable price are accessible to individuals & companies ranging from large & multinational companies to small and medium companies all over the world (Walker, 2011).

However, things may be different in China. China has strict internet censorship for political reasons, although it is highly disputable. Great Firewall of China which is the building blocks of China's internet censorship system makes it more difficult to communicate with other countries through internet (Anderson, 2012). So, some legal & nonpolitical internet services available, such as Google, are not allowed in China. Hence, some communication tools such as WhatsApp, Google meeting is not easily used in China. The Chinese always use VPN, a technology to bypass the Great Firewall to get access to the tools originally banned. However, the VPN is not free, and the internet connection is not good all the time. Hence, the Great Firewall can be an important reason to consider deliberately what communication tools should be used when conducting business with Chinese companies through internet tools.

In summary, with all these instruments existing in business communication process, there is normally a personal preferred communication tool personally and the more effective method of communication in China. We pose three research questions:

What kinds of communication patterns are mostly used by Chinese businesspersons?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of each tool in intercultural business communication?

What are the most effective tools for Chinese businesspersons in intercultural business communication?

Through analyzing the preferred and the most effective method of intercultural business communication of Chinese people, people can learn better about Chinese intercultural business communication, which can cast a light on how to communicate with Chinese businessmen more effectively.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, studies related to e-communication tools & communication effectiveness are researched.

### Type of E-Communication Tools

Communication can be divided into vocal communication & verbal communication (Dana, 2000). These methods work in different ways in the process of communication. Which method will be used in business communication interaction is totally determined by the communicators, consciously or unconsciously (Borden, 1985). Vocal communication is spoken words using web-based presentation instruments such as Zomo, Google meeting & WebEx.

Verbal communication are written words using email. Besides, instant messages can be seen as the combination of spoken communication tools and written communication tools. The most common used instant message services are WhatsApp, WeChat, & Skype.

### **Web-Based Presentation Tools**

Web-based presentation tools include Google meeting. com, Zomo. com, WebEx. com, etc. These tools allow employees to host a meeting remotely, do the presentation & provide the audio. They are used as a platform allowing the employees to share PowerPoint presentation, word documents, excel documents and much more (Jensen & Tunon, 2012). Some of the tools even allow users share their own computer's screen to show others exactly what they see in the computer's desktop. At the same time, users can also add a video stream which make it possible that others can see the presenter when he or she is doing the presentation.

Web-based presentation tools are increasing both in popularity and enhanced in quality nowadays. More and more updated systems or tools are being created. With more functions & greater performance, web-based presentation tools allow users to do more & have better experience than before. Due to all these advantages, businesspersons can better attend the meeting, undertake projects and participate in activities. Businesspersons can communicate more effectively and efficiently with web-based presentation tools.

### **Emails**

Email (electronic mail) is one of the most popular used communication methods in business communication because it is use-friendly, convenient, cost effective (Berghel, 1997; Whittaker et al., 2006) and has rich method of communication (Panteli, 2002).

Email as one of a communication tools has its strengths and shortcomings. As for advantages, email can be instantaneously and simultaneously sent to any receivers wherever they are and whenever it is. Sproull & Kiesler (1986) claim that email is a helpful tool to remove barriers to communication including distance, time & allow the information freely to spread in the company. As for disadvantages, email is just another form of written message, & comprehension problems often arise & reduce its efficacy. Walther (1992) claims that email eliminates nonverbal codes that are normally rich in relational information. Besides, email lacks the social context cues. Social context cues are defined by Walther (1992) as those "aspects of the environment & actors' nonverbal behaviors that define the nature of the social situation & the actors' relative status". Lacking social context cues, uninhibited communication such as insults, swearing & hostile, intense language may appear frequently. Sproull & Kiesler (1986) found that when people communicate with email, they pay more attention to oneself rather than the other and behave more irresponsibly than that when they communicate face-to-face. In addition, there is huge volume of email sent and received (e.g., IDC, 2007). On average, a common employee receives an email every five minutes. As a result, emails can distract productivity instead of being beneficial (Cranor & LaMacchia, 1998; Wilson, 2002).

### **Instant Messages**

Communication instruments which can receive instant messages include WhatsApp, WeChat and Skype. It is hard to define instant message because of the ever-changing technology. Nardi, et al., (2000) defined instant message as "near-synchronous computer-based one-on-one communication. With a fast network, transmission times are fractions of a second & the experience is of near-synchronous interaction. Like chat, instant message allows users to type messages into a window, but like the phone, it is based on a dyadic 'call model'" (Nardi et al., 2000, p. 80). However, Nardi's definition is not completely precise because instant message is still changing. Besides, instant message is a kind of written language because the message is made up of typed or written words. However, claims that instant message is different from

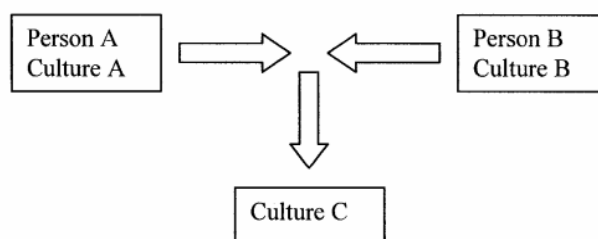
written communication & has its unique characteristics. First, interaction in instant message is more instant. Isaacs, et al., (2002) states that instant message is more brief with a single purpose in conversation. Second, messages are produced spontaneously instead of pondering over words and sentences for a long time. Therefore, the tempo of instant message is like spoken communication. However, characteristics of written communication are suitable for instant message, e.g. permanence and transportability, uniqueness of prosody and unnaturalness. All in all, instant message has both the characteristic of spoken communication and written communication.

The instant message in this paper includes WhatsApp, WeChat & Skype. A user can send messages to one or more receivers, & meantime can have synchronous communication through voice and video with others. Besides, emoticons which one can select from a set of options can be sent with just a click.

### **Intercultural Communication Effectiveness**

Intercultural communication is the “communication between people from different national cultures” (Gudykunst, 2002 p.79). Since the intercultural communication involves two or more cultures, complex situation and problems are more likely occur in the communication process. Business communication has been studied broadly. Different perspectives of business communication and factors impacting communication effectiveness are studied (Dana, 2000). Tosi, et al., (1994) states that “communication effectiveness is the degree to which a message is received and understood and if the receiver’s reactions to the message correspond to the sender’s purposes in sending it” (p.370).

Dodd (1998) proposed a model of intercultural communication in which the participants from two different cultures can create a new culture. In the third culture they created, they experience positive climate, trust so as to get a good intercultural communication result. The model is shown in figure 1.



**FIGURE 1**

### **DODD'S (1998) MODEL OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION**

According to Dodd (1998), the final goal of intercultural communication is to achieve effectiveness. He also claimed that there are three variables to measure whether the intercultural communication is effective: task, relationship and cultural adjustment. The task refers to whether the work task is successfully completed. The relationship refers to quality of relationships during the communication. Relationships with high quality includes mutual understanding, effective conflict management and reducing tensions. Relationship development is an important part in business communication. Penley & Hawkins (1985) stated that business communication is both relational and content oriented. Relationship establishment is a significant part of business communication and even the main goal sometimes. Baum et al., (1998) claim that to which extent one can build relationships with others can be affected by the immediacy and directness of communication. The more direct and immediate method of the communication, the more possible one establishes business connections with others. Hence if

the purpose of the communication is to establish relations, communication method can have great impact on that and direct communication method would be the first choice. Cultural adjustment refers to the process of “going through transitions and adapting to the stresses of new culture”. So, in this research, the effectiveness of intercultural communication tools will be measured from task results, relationship results and cultural adjustment results.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

To solve the problem mentioned in this paper, employees of Company X, an international software company located in Beijing were chosen as the participants. In order to interpret the specific reasons for Chinese employees’ preference of intercultural business communication tools, semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirty participants answering the interview questions. Before the interviews were conducted, substantial tests were made including carrying pilot study to test the effectiveness of the questions, and consulting three employees to make the interview more straight for ware. Modification was made after the tests. The interviews were conducted face-to-face at the company X. Among the thirty participants, 13 are males and 17 were females. All the participants have more than one year experience of intercultural business communication.

### **Data Collection**

The semi-structure interview was conducted, & the interview protocol is developed based on the research questions including the communication method, preference, advantage and disadvantage & effectiveness of intercultural communication. By conducting the interview, the researcher can learn about the detailed knowledge about the usage of intercultural communication services. The interview protocol was translated into Chinese by two Chinese translators who have the expertise of both English & Chinese and the interviews were all conducted in Chinese in case misunderstanding should arise from the limited English proficiency of the participants. The questions of interview are shown as follows.

How do you communicate with foreign counterparts during Covid-19?

What communication instruments did you use in intercultural business communication?

What communication instruments do you prefer during communication, why?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of google meeting/ Zomo/WebEx/email/WhatsApp/ Skype/WeChat?

Which way do you think is the most effective method of communication according to your opinion and why?

Which tools can best help you achieve your working target?

Which tools can best help you develop relationships with your counterpart?

Which tools can best help you reduce misunderstanding caused by cultural differences?

### **Data Analysis**

All the interviews were tape-recorded, and the responses were transcribed. The themes of interview analysis were based on the research questions and interview responses. In the first stage of data analysis, the researcher edited, segmented, and summarized the data. In the second stage, the researcher discovered the themes, clusters, and patterns of the interview responses. The common and outstanding expressions or thinking of the interview responses was regarded as a theme. There were three themes in the data including situations and preference, advantages and disadvantages of communication tools as well as effectiveness of intercultural communication. The theme effectiveness of intercultural communication can be sub-divided into

task effectiveness, relationship effectiveness and cultural adjustment effectiveness. After that, all the data is categorized-analyzed under each theme.

## **RESULTS & FINDINGS**

### **Situation & Preference**

There are different preferences of communication instruments for Chinese business employees. In their daily communication, emails & instant messages are the most common communication tools. The most commonly used instant message tools are WeChat, WhatsApp & Skype. Chinese businesspersons use email when there is something formal to announce. Besides, they would like to use email when the matter is in no hurry so that they have time to wait for reply of their interactants. When they need to send files, email would be used as the first choice, but they often combine email & instant messages in daily communication because sometimes the foreign counterparts cannot check emails regularly or in time, hence, they would like to use instant messages to inform the other about the email. If it is one-to-one communication, they often text instant messages to the other, but when there is something emergency or misunderstandings occur, they will use voice communication. But they are unwilling to use voice communication because they think they can not totally understand the meaning of each other. For one thing, they find it difficult to understand the accent of their counterparts. For another, many Chinese businesspersons do not have confidence to speak English up and they cannot find the proper words instantly. So, they only call their interactants in emergency or when the problem can be solved in one or two words. For example, they want the other to make a confirmation for a certain matter. In addition, they prefer to use voice communication when the matter is too complicated to explain, and not in formal occasion. For example, an informal training is often conducted through voice communication of instant message services. When it involves many people in the business process or in formal occasion, Google meeting, Tencent meeting & Zomo are commonly used to hold a meeting or do presentations.

### **Advantages & Disadvantages**

There are advantages & disadvantages of each the communication tools in Chinese employees' opinion. The advantages & disadvantages of every kind of communication tools are shown in table 4.1.

As for instant messages, Chinese employees consider it as the fastest channel to communicate. WeChat is their favorite communication tool to use because it is commonly used in China & Chinese employees are very familiar with it. But not too much non-Chinese counterparts use WeChat in other countries, & only businesspersons with Chinese background use it. For example, they have studied or lived in China or they have Chinese friends or family. If they cannot use WeChat, WhatsApp will be used, since it is commonly used in other countries & it is like WeChat, so it is easily to use. However, due to the Great Firewall of China, WhatsApp is not allowed to use. Hence, Chinese employees must use VPN services which provide a tool to bypass the firewall to get access to the internet. The VPN service needs to be purchased by Chinese employees, & the price is about 30 RMB a month and more than 200 RMB a year. Besides, when using VPN to get access to WhatsApp, the internet is not smooth all the time. Message delay, message not received or sent, & poor voice quality frequently occur when Chinese employees using WhatsApp services in China. The other instant message tools Chinese businesspersons often use is Skype. It is easy to use & apart from text messages, a function they often use in Skype is the screen sharing. They can show their screen to the other and make some presentation or training and there is no need VPN when using Skype. However, Skype cannot be used anytime they want, they can only get contact with their counterparts when

both are online. When the one you want to contact is not online, the messages cannot be sent to him or her.

As for emails, Chinese employees use emails frequently, especially when there are documents or files needed to be sent. It is convenient to send emails & nearly all the employees around the world use email as a communication tool at work. Although email is not very fast to get response, they think that writing an email is better for them to search for proper expressions and language so that they can express the accurate meaning with right words, while using instant message services they do not have time to think about their language. However, when communicating with emails, some Chinese employees think it is not a very effective way to communicate. They said that some of the interactants from other countries have no habit of checking emails regularly, and some of their counterparts are lazy to check emails & reply immediately. Besides sometimes the emails they send or receive are sorted into dustbin instead of inbox for unknown reasons, so they cannot get response immediately & cannot conduct business efficiently. In addition, language is another barrier to efficient communication by emails. Some of the Chinese employees think there are some inaccurate expressions when they write emails. Sometimes they cannot understand the meaning of interactants. For one reason, English is the second language of most Chinese employees, so they have some problem to understand English expressions. For another reason, the interactants from other countries always use abbreviation, slang, or even wrong expressions in the email, especially for the interactants whose mother tongue is not English and have to communicate with Chinese employees in English. So, misunderstandings and conflict often occur because of the language and expressions in email.

As for web-based presentation tools, Chinese employees use them only in formal occasions or when many people are involved in the business. If it is one-to-one communication, it is not very convenient to send a link to the other & talk in a kind of meeting room. In this situation, instant messages would be much easier to get the same goal. Chinese employees think web-based presentation tools are used to better to understand each other, express one's own opinions & do the presentation through the function of sharing screen. The most common used web-based presentation tools are Zomo, which is a substitute of Zoom in China, since Zoom is not allowed in China. Chinese employees think that Zomo is more in line with Chinese people's habits, & it is easy to use. However, it may happen & often does that some of the participants cannot use the tool properly. For example, they are unable to mute the microphone, nor share the screens. Therefore, the meeting may be disturbed for these reasons.

Other web-based presentation tools have the similar advantages and disadvantages, such as WebEx, Google meeting and Tencent meeting. However, of all these web-based presentation tools, the last choice is Google meeting, because VPN is needed to get access to it and using VPN means the poor internet connection (Table 1).

<b>Communication tools</b>		<b>Advantages</b>	<b>Disadvantages</b>
Instant messages	WeChat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fast</li> <li>• Easy to use</li> <li>• familiar with</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Only few non-Chinese use it</li> </ul>
	Whatsapp	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fast</li> <li>• Easy to use</li> <li>• cover most foreign interactants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need to buy VPN services</li> <li>• the internet is not smooth</li> </ul>
	Skype	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fast</li> <li>• Easy to use</li> <li>• Can show screen while talking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can only chat when the contactor is online</li> </ul>
email		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Convenient</li> <li>• easy to send document</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not immediate,</li> <li>• easy to cause misunderstanding and conflict because of language and expressions</li> </ul>

Web-based presentation tools	Zomo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Better understanding and expression</li> <li>• Communicate when many people involved</li> <li>• In line with Chinese people's habits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficult to operate</li> <li>• Easy to be disturb</li> </ul>
	Webex	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Better understanding and expression</li> <li>• communicate when many people involved</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficult to operate</li> <li>• Easy to be disturb</li> </ul>
	Tencent meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Better understanding and expression</li> <li>• communicate when many people involved</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficult to operate</li> <li>• Easy to be disturb</li> </ul>
	Google meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Better understanding and expression</li> <li>• communicate when many people involved</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficult to operate</li> <li>• Easy to be disturb</li> <li>• VPN is needed so internet connection is not smooth</li> </ul>

## Effectiveness

The effectiveness of communication tools is measured from three factors: task outcomes, relationship outcomes & cultural adjustment results.

When it comes to task outcomes, Chinese employees think the combination use of email & instant messages is the most direct & effective way to exchange information. Chinese employees prefer to get reply quickly so that they can finish the job with the shortest time. Hence, they send emails to the counterparts and they expect to get the immediate reply. If they do not get the reply in time, instant messages tools WeChat, WhatsApp or Skype will be used as the reminder.

When it comes to relationship outcomes, Chinese employees think face-to-face communication is the best way to create relationship with others. While in tele-communication, instant message tools are the best way to build relationships because it is quick to reply through instant messages and the atmosphere of conversation is casual. The use of Emoji is helpful to create friendly & relaxing chat environment, so the relationship can be developed easily. Besides, web-based presentation tools are also good methods to develop relationship. Because using web-based presentation tools, people can talk and see each other personally. It's a kind of process of communicating face-to-face since you can see each other & know the other's feelings and mode by seeing their face and hearing their tone.

When it comes to cultural adjustment, cultural differences are most experienced in instant messages & emails. Cultural conflict is mostly happened in instant messages & emails. However, instant message tools are the fastest method to create a new culture fit for the two interactants. Besides, they find most cultural differences and misunderstandings when communicating through emails. When communicating with instant messages, they can solve the misunderstanding immediately, while emails requires more explanation.

All in all, instant message is the preferred method & is considered as the most effective way to communicate with people from other countries.

## CONCLUSION

This paper investigates the usage of intercultural communication tools of Chinese businesspersons. First, the preference of the communication tools they used when communicating with foreign counterparts in different situations is researched. Through interviews, the data shows that instant message services are the most used tools by Chinese business persons in their daily communication because it is fast and instant. But on formal



occasions, they tend to choose emails because they can attach files & write more. In particular, when matter is not in urgency, emails will be the first choice because they can search for more accurate expressions. On contrary, When the matter to be communicated is urgent or complicated, voice communication services through instant messages are preferred. Only when there are many participants involved & when formal meetings are needed, web-based presentation tools will be used. Chinese businesspersons always use emails and instant messages together to make the communication more effective. They always send their counterparts emails first and inform them to check the email through instant messages.

The second research question is the advantages and disadvantages of every communication tool used by Chinese businesspersons. In the opinion of Chinese businesspersons, instant message services are the fastest tools to communicate, but for those with a limited English proficiency, they have no time to think about their language & expressions so they can not express properly during communication. Besides, VPN needs to be used which may cause network instability. As for Emails, it is easy to send files and use precise language on some formal occasions, but it is not so fast to get instant response from receivers. Web-based presentation tools are the most effective tools to communicate when many participants are involved on formal occasions, but they are not very convenient for daily communication and it is difficult to operate.

The third research question is to discover the effectiveness of intercultural communication perceived by Chinese businesspersons. The instant messages are the most effective tools to finish the communication task because they can get quick response so that the task can be done efficiently. Besides, instant messages are helpful for developing interpersonal relationship because the atmosphere of the communication process is casual. Web-based presentation tools are also helpful to build relationship because communicators can see each other, & it is the best analogy of face-to-face communication. Many researchers have proved that people prefer face-to-face medium for many business tasks. In addition, most conflicts caused by cultural differences appear in emails and instant messages. But Chinese businessperson think by using instant messages the conflicts can be solved quickly. The new culture fit for both parts can be created quickly by using instant messages.

All in all, instant messages are the most used intercultural communication tools by Chinese businesspersons in their daily communication. Using emails & instant messages together is also common in their daily communication. This paper discovered the preference and consideration of Chinese business persons when they use different tools to communicate with people from other countries in their daily business practices. This study is helpful for people from other countries to think about the proper manner to communicate with Chinese businesspersons. The effective way to communicate with Chinese businesspersons need to be further studied.

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