

CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC COMPETENCIES AS DRIVERS OF WORK ENGAGEMENT IN GLOBAL TEAMS: A REVIEW

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Abstract

As organisations increasingly rely on Global Virtual Teams (GVTs), sustaining employee work engagement across cultural and linguistic boundaries has become a critical challenge for multinational corporations (MNCs). This paper presents a systematic narrative review of empirical literature published between 2012 and 2025, examining how cultural intelligence (CQ) and linguistic competence jointly drive work engagement, characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption, in global team contexts. Drawing on 22 primary studies, the review finds that CQ, particularly its cognitive, motivational, and metacognitive dimensions, consistently predicts engagement by functioning as a personal resource that buffers against cross-cultural stressors. Linguistic competence reinforces engagement through two complementary pathways: the facilitation of social integration via host country national support, and the mitigation of cognitive load arising from foreign language anxiety. These relationships are mediated by psychological needs satisfaction, trust, and conflict resolution capacity, and are moderated by organisational culture adaptability, cultural distance, and employees' individualism-collectivism orientations. The review reveals a persistent gap in research from developing-country and African MNC contexts, with most evidence concentrated in East Asian and Western settings. Based on these findings, seven evidence-grounded recommendations are proposed for global HR practitioners, covering CQ training integration, language support systems, peer inclusion programmes, and adaptive organisational culture development. The paper contributes a unified conceptual synthesis that bridges the fragmented treatment of cultural and linguistic competencies in existing literature.

Keywords: Cultural intelligence, Cross-cultural management, Global virtual teams, Linguistic competence, Multinational corporations, Work engagement.

Introduction

The modern business landscape has witnessed a significant shift toward the utilisation of Global Virtual Teams (GVTs) within Multinational Corporations (MNCs) (Tavoletti, 2023; Liu, 2025). As organisations expand across borders, work engagement

defined as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption has emerged as a critical performance driver (Edobor & Akenzua, 2023; Min et al., 2023). Sustaining this engagement, however, requires employees who are equipped with cultural and linguistic

competencies: the ability to function effectively across national cultures and communicate in diverse languages (Presbitero, 2023; Presbitero et al., 2025).

Despite the strategic importance of GVTs, organisations face a persistent challenge: employees embedded in culturally and linguistically diverse teams frequently exhibit diminished engagement due to barriers that compound cognitive load, interpersonal anxiety, and communicative inefficiency (Stahl & Maznevski, 2021). Cultural differences and language gaps do not operate in isolation — they intersect to create psychological stressors that erode the vigour and dedication necessary for sustained performance. This represents a significant organisational problem because lost engagement translates directly into reduced task performance, higher attrition, and weakened team cohesion.

The existing literature, while informative, remains fragmented. Studies have examined either cultural intelligence (Presbitero, 2020; Gabel-Shemueli et al., 2019; Poort et al., 2023) or language proficiency (Fu & Charoensukmongkol, 2021; Blazi & Awolusi, 2020) as separate constructs, without integrating both into a unified explanatory framework. Furthermore, studies tend to be sector-specific confined to hospitality (Min et al., 2023), construction (Chen et al., 2024), or academic expatriates (Ramalu & Subramaniam, 2019) limiting their generalisability. A synthesis that brings together these dimensions across global contexts is therefore warranted.

This paper addresses that gap by reviewing how cultural intelligence (CQ) and linguistic

competence jointly drive work engagement in global teams. Specifically, it aims to: (i) assess the impact of cultural intelligence and host language proficiency on employee work engagement; (ii) identify the mediating roles of psychological and social factors such as trust and psychological needs satisfaction in translating these competencies into engagement; and (iii) examine how organisational culture and contextual variables, such as cultural distance, moderate the competency–engagement relationship.

Literature Review

Work Engagement

Work engagement in global teams refers to a positive, fulfilling psychological state that enables employees to invest sustained physical, cognitive, and emotional energy into their tasks across cultural boundaries (Raj & Gogoi, 2025). Its three core dimensions vigour (high energy and resilience), dedication (significance and enthusiasm), and absorption (deep immersion in work) serve as the primary outcome variables in this review (Presbitero et al., 2025).

Shaik et al. (2021) demonstrated that engagement in GVTs is dynamically shaped by cultural identity and team configuration, with cultural alignment or misalignment triggering gain or loss cycles. Ramalu and Subramaniam (2019) further established that engagement is mediated by psychological needs satisfaction, extending the construct beyond task involvement to intrinsic fulfilment. Chen et al. (2024) showed that work engagement serves as a critical mechanism linking CQ to expatriate task performance and retention, while Min et al.

(2023) confirmed that even employees in home-country settings can experience elevated engagement when exposed to diverse clientele underscoring the breadth of contextual influences on this construct.

Cultural Competencies

Cultural competence refers to an individual's capacity to function effectively across diverse national, ethnic, and organisational cultures (Iskhakova & Ott, 2020). It encompasses knowledge, attitudes, skills, and metacognitive awareness required to perceive and respond to cultural cues in ways that facilitate productive collaboration.

The dominant operationalisation in the literature is Cultural Intelligence (CQ), structured across four interrelated dimensions, namely metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioural (Poort et al., 2023; Presbitero et al., 2025).

The metacognitive dimension involves planning, monitoring, and revising mental models during intercultural interactions (Schmidt et al., 2024; Yusuff et al., 2024). The cognitive dimension reflects breadth of knowledge about cultural norms, values, and institutional frameworks (Min et al., 2023). The motivational dimension captures self-efficacy and genuine interest in cross-cultural engagement, while the behavioural dimension pertains to the flexibility of verbal and nonverbal repertoires in cross-cultural encounters (Min et al., 2023). Poort et al. (2023) established CQ, alongside openness to experience, as the strongest predictor of cognitive engagement in internationally diverse groups, outperforming even English language proficiency. Gabel-Shemueli et al. (2019) confirmed the positive CQ–

engagement link, showing it to be moderated by employees' idiocentrism-allocentrism orientations and the adaptability dimension of organisational culture.

Linguistic Competencies

Linguistic competence in global teams encompasses both grammatical accuracy and communicative competence including pragmatic appropriateness, discourse coherence, and sociolinguistic sensitivity (Fu & Charoensukmongkol, 2021). Fu and Charoensukmongkol (2021) demonstrated that host language proficiency directly predicts work engagement among Chinese expatriates in Thailand, with support from host country nationals partially mediating this relationship. This confirms that language mastery facilitates not only functional communication but also the social integration necessary for full occupational engagement.

Presbitero (2020) identified a cognitive load pathway through which inadequate foreign language skills generate anxiety that negatively impairs task performance, with CQ dimensions moderating this adverse effect. Poort et al. (2023) found that while English proficiency contributes to cognitive engagement in diverse groups, it is comparatively weaker than CQ and openness, suggesting that a common language enables participation but does not alone generate the intrinsic motivation required for deep engagement. Blazi and Awolusi (2020) further established that multilingual communication barriers undermine psychological commitment to work, reinforcing language as a multi-pathway driver of engagement.

Mediating and Moderating Factors

Mediating and moderating factors differ in their roles within a relationship between variables in research. A mediating factor (or mediator) explains the mechanism or process through which an independent variable influences a dependent variable, showing how or why an effect occurs. In other words, the mediator transmits the effect of one variable to another (Hayes, 2022). In contrast, a moderating factor (or moderator) influences the strength or direction of the relationship between an independent and dependent variable, explaining when, for whom, or under what conditions an effect occurs (Hayes, 2022; Baron & Kenny, 1986; Fairchild & MacKinnon, 2009). Thus, while mediators clarify causal pathways, moderators alter the intensity or nature of relationships between variables

The competency–engagement relationship is not direct but is shaped by psychological and contextual mechanisms. Trust particularly from host country national support was identified by Fu and Charoensukmongkol (2021) as a partial mediator between language proficiency and engagement. Ramalu and Subramaniam (2019) demonstrated that psychological needs satisfaction (autonomy, competence, relatedness) partially mediates the CQ–engagement link. Chen and Thompson (2023) showed that cultural metacognition enhances engagement partly through improved conflict resolution skills.

At the moderating level, cultural distance amplifies the CQ–engagement relationship: Chen et al. (2024) found that under conditions of greater cultural dissimilarity, the impact of CQ on engagement through task performance

becomes stronger. Organisational culture, specifically its adaptability dimension was identified by Gabel-Shemueli et al. (2019) as a boundary condition for the CQ–engagement effect. Industry context and employees' collectivist versus individualist orientations further moderate how competencies translate into engagement outcomes (Gabel-Shemueli et al., 2019; Schmidt et al., 2024).

Methodology

This study adopts a systematic narrative review methodology to synthesise extant empirical and theoretical literature on the relationship between cultural and linguistic competencies and work engagement in global teams. The review encompasses peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and conference proceedings published between 2012 and 2025, sourced from databases including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and EBSCO.

Search terms were structured around three conceptual clusters: (i) cultural intelligence, CQ dimensions, and cross-cultural competence; (ii) linguistic competence, language proficiency, and foreign language anxiety; and (iii) work engagement, vigour, dedication, and absorption in global or virtual team contexts. Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to combine terms across clusters. Inclusion criteria required that studies: (a) employed quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods designs; (b) focused explicitly on multicultural or multilingual work settings; and (c) measured at least one dimension of work engagement as an outcome or mediating variable.

A total of 22 primary sources met the inclusion criteria and form the analytical basis of this review. The literature was analysed thematically across four domains: (i) work engagement as an outcome construct, (ii) cultural competencies as predictors, (iii) linguistic competencies as predictors, and (iv) mediating and moderating mechanisms. This framework enables a structured synthesis of findings while preserving the contextual nuances identified across diverse sectoral and geographic settings.

Results and Discussion

Cultural Intelligence as a Driver of Work Engagement

The reviewed literature consistently establishes CQ as a robust predictor of work engagement in global teams. Gabel-Shemueli et al. (2019) provided foundational evidence using conservation of resources theory, showing that CQ positively predicts engagement in a multinational organisation, with the relationship moderated by idiocentrism-allocentrism and organisational culture adaptability. Ramalu and Subramaniam (2019) corroborated this in an academic expatriate context, demonstrating that CQ drives engagement both directly and indirectly through psychological needs satisfaction.

The cognitive and motivational dimensions of CQ emerge as particularly influential. Min et al. (2023) showed that both dimensions predict employee engagement in culturally diverse hospitality settings, with motivational CQ also buffering against burnout. Poort et al. (2023) confirmed that CQ surpasses English proficiency as a predictor of cognitive

engagement. Chen et al. (2024) extended the evidence to construction expatriates, demonstrating that CQ influences performance and retention intentions through work engagement, with cultural distance strengthening this mediated pathway. These findings collectively suggest that CQ functions as a personal resource that sustains positive work states across varied global contexts.

The Role of Linguistic Competence in Engagement

Linguistic competence operates through distinct but complementary mechanisms. Fu and Charoensukmongkol (2021) established a direct link between host language proficiency and engagement among Chinese expatriates, partially mediated by host country national support — indicating that language mastery facilitates social inclusion, which in turn promotes engagement. This social integration pathway suggests that language functions not merely as a communication tool but as a bridge to relational trust and organisational belonging.

The cognitive load pathway identified by Presbitero (2020) reveals a contrasting dynamic: employees with low foreign language proficiency experience heightened anxiety that diminishes task performance and, by extension, engagement. Notably, CQ dimensions moderated this anxiety effect, suggesting that cultural competence can partially compensate for linguistic limitations. However, the combined evidence, including Blazi and Awolusi's (2020) findings on UN peacekeeping staff, confirms that language barriers impose real psychological costs that

cultural intelligence alone cannot fully offset. Organisations must therefore address linguistic and cultural competencies in tandem rather than in isolation.

Mediating Mechanisms: Trust and Psychological Needs

The reviewed literature identifies two primary mediating mechanisms. First, psychological needs satisfaction, encompassing autonomy, competence, and relatedness mediates the CQ–engagement relationship (Ramalu & Subramaniam, 2019). This finding aligns with Self-Determination Theory and suggests that CQ promotes engagement by creating conditions in which employees feel intrinsically motivated and relationally connected. Second, social support from host country nationals partially mediates the language proficiency–engagement relationship (Fu & Charoensukmongkol, 2021), indicating that peer inclusion amplifies the engagement benefits of linguistic competence.

Chen and Thompson (2023) introduced conflict resolution effectiveness as an additional mediating pathway, showing that cultural metacognition, a higher-order CQ dimension enhances engagement partly by improving employees' capacity to navigate interpersonal tensions in diverse teams. Patel et al. (2022) identified three further mechanisms: improved cross-cultural relationship building, enhanced tolerance for cultural ambiguity, and increased confidence in intercultural interaction. These findings collectively indicate that the competency–engagement relationship is psychologically rich, operating through multiple affective, relational, and cognitive pathways.

Moderating Role of Organisational and Contextual Factors

Organisational culture and contextual variables meaningfully condition the competency–engagement relationship. Gabel-Shemueli et al. (2019) demonstrated that the adaptability dimension of organisational culture strengthens the CQ–engagement link, while employees' idiocentrism-allocentrism orientations moderate whether motivational and behavioural CQ translate into engagement outcomes. These findings imply that organisations with rigid, low-adaptability cultures may inadvertently suppress the engagement benefits of employees' cultural competencies.

Cultural distance is a critical environmental moderator: Chen et al. (2024) found that the indirect effect of CQ on performance intentions through engagement is stronger under conditions of greater cultural dissimilarity, reinforcing that high-CQ employees are particularly valuable in challenging cross-cultural assignments. Schmidt et al. (2024) extended this logic across different MNC contexts, confirming that industry type and cultural distance jointly shape the metacognitive CQ–engagement relationship. These findings have direct implications for global talent deployment and cross-cultural training programme design.

Conclusion

This review demonstrates that cultural intelligence and linguistic competence are not peripheral soft skills but central determinants of work engagement in global teams. The literature consistently shows that CQ particularly its cognitive, motivational, and

metacognitive dimensions functions as a personal resource that sustains vigour, dedication, and absorption in cross-cultural work environments. Linguistic competence reinforces this by enabling social integration and mitigating the cognitive anxiety associated with language barriers.

The relationship between competencies and engagement is not linear but is shaped by psychological mediators, including needs satisfaction, social support, and conflict resolution capacity and by contextual moderators such as organisational culture adaptability and cultural distance. This varied picture underscores the inadequacy of single-dimension interventions and calls for holistic frameworks that develop cultural and linguistic competencies together within enabling organisational structures.

Existing research, while substantial, is concentrated in specific sectors (hospitality, construction, academia) and geographies (East Asia, Europe, North America). Developing-country and African MNC contexts remain underexplored, with studies by Udegbe (2012) and Yusuff et al. (2024) representing notable but limited exceptions for the Nigerian context. Future research should extend these frameworks across diverse regional settings and examine longitudinal competency development trajectories and their sustained impact on engagement outcomes.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are grounded directly in the findings of this review and are directed at MNCs and global HR practitioners:

1. **Integrate CQ development into pre-deployment training:** Since cognitive

and motivational CQ are the strongest predictors of engagement (Min et al., 2023; Poort et al., 2023), organisations should embed structured CQ training covering all four dimensions into onboarding programmes for global team members, not merely as a one-off workshop but as a continuous developmental process.

2. **Provide host language support for expatriates:** Given that host language proficiency directly predicts engagement through social inclusion (Fu & Charoensukmongkol, 2021), MNCs should offer structured language learning resources and mentoring from host country nationals before and during international assignments, with particular attention to communicative not only grammatical competence.
3. **Address foreign language anxiety through cognitive load management:** Since anxiety induced by low language proficiency undermines engagement via the cognitive load pathway (Presbitero, 2020), organisations should create psychologically safe team environments that reduce performance pressure on non-native speakers, including bilingual documentation, structured communication norms, and explicit acknowledgement of language diversity.
4. **Foster adaptive organisational cultures:** Since organisational culture adaptability moderates whether employee CQ translates into

engagement (Gabel-Shemueli et al., 2019), HR leaders should conduct cultural audits and actively cultivate flexibility, inclusivity, and psychological safety as organisational values, particularly in MNCs operating across high cultural distance contexts.

5. **Tailor assignments using cultural distance data:** Since cultural distance amplifies the CQ–engagement relationship (Chen et al., 2024), organisations should leverage cultural distance assessments in assignment decisions, ensuring that employees with higher CQ are prioritised for postings involving greater cultural dissimilarity while providing enhanced support for those in lower-CQ profiles.
6. **Facilitate peer integration programmes:** Since host country national support mediates the

language–engagement link (Fu & Charoensukmongkol, 2021), organisations should formalise peer buddy or mentoring systems that connect incoming global team members with local colleagues, accelerating social integration and reducing relational isolation.

7. **Invest in research on under-represented contexts:** Since existing studies are concentrated in East Asia and Western MNCs, with limited evidence from African and other developing-country contexts (Udegbe, 2012; Yusuff et al., 2024), organisations operating in these regions should commission contextualised studies and adapt global CQ frameworks to local cultural and linguistic realities rather than applying them wholesale.

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