

Developing Intercultural Intelligence: The Role of Emotional Intelligence in Adaptive Strategies in Foreign Environments

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Abstract

This study investigates how Emotional Intelligence (EI) influences the strategies individuals use to adapt to foreign environments. The research is grounded in the Ability Model of Emotional Intelligence (Mayer et al., 2016), which includes four components: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and social skills. A quantitative methodology was employed, using a survey distributed to 192 participants from 31 nationalities. Emotional intelligence was measured using the MSCEIT scale (Mayer et al., 2002), and adaptation strategies were assessed via self-reported frequency on a 7-point Likert-type scale. Statistical analyses revealed a significant positive association between EI and adaptive strategies. These findings underscore the role of interpersonal dimensions of EI in facilitating cultural adaptation.

Keywords: Emotional intelligence; cultural adaptation; intercultural communication; self-awareness; social skills

JEL Classification: M16; M12; J24

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1. Introduction

As globalization intensifies, individuals increasingly find themselves navigating complex foreign environments - whether through international work placements, academic exchanges, or migration. Yet, despite the growing frequency of these intercultural encounters, many still face challenges such as cultural dissonance, miscommunication, and emotional stress when adapting abroad.

Emotional intelligence (EI) refers to "one's ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions" (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, p. 189). Unlike cognitive intelligence, which is largely

innate, EI is dynamic and can evolve throughout life. Multiple factors influence EI, and in cross-cultural contexts, the ability to manage emotions and interpersonal situations seems to be essential to prevent culture shock and promote effective communication (Arghode et al., 2023).

Arguably, to interact effectively across cultures, individuals must be attuned not only to the emotions of others but also to their own emotional regulation. To better understand and appreciate others and their cultures, we need to understand our own emotions and the way we interact with others (Arghode et al., 2023).

While emotional intelligence (EI) has been widely associated with successful social functioning (Juniar et al., 2023; Trigueros et al., 2020), leadership (Coronado-Maldonado & Benítez-Márquez, 2023; Prati et al., 2003), and well-being (Caballero-García & Ruiz, 2025; Martskvishvili & Lagidze, 2022), empirical research exploring its influence on cross-cultural adaptation remains scarce. Although cultural intelligence (CQ) is often emphasized in multicultural contexts, EI may play a similarly critical role—especially when it comes to understanding, interpreting, and regulating emotions in unfamiliar social environments. Prior studies suggest that higher EI is associated with lower levels of intercultural communication apprehension and better conflict resolution (Gullekson & Tucker, 2012), but few investigations have examined how each dimension of EI (Mayer et al., 2002), namely self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and social skills, uniquely contributes to the behavioral strategies individuals adopt to navigate foreign settings.

Furthermore, while existing literature acknowledges that EI is not static and may evolve across the lifespan or through immersion in diverse experiences (Herrera Granda et al., 2023), there is limited understanding of how these changes are reflected in adaptation behaviors. Most notably, the relationship between EI and specific adaptive strategies—such as language acquisition, relationship-building, or conflict avoidance—remains underexplored in quantitative terms.

This study addresses that gap by examining how different components of EI correlate with the use of adaptive strategies in cross-cultural contexts, using a robust, multi-dimensional scale across a diverse sample of respondents from 31 nationalities.

Understanding the emotional competencies that enable individuals to adapt across cultures is critical in an increasingly interconnected world where global mobility, multicultural teams, and international assignments are commonplace. By identifying which aspects of EI are most strongly associated with successful adaptation strategies, this study offers practical insights for global HR development, international education programs, and cross-cultural training initiatives. Moreover, it contributes to the growing discourse on emotional and intercultural intelligence by emphasizing EI not just as a personal trait but as a trainable skill that supports intercultural effectiveness.

2. Literature Review

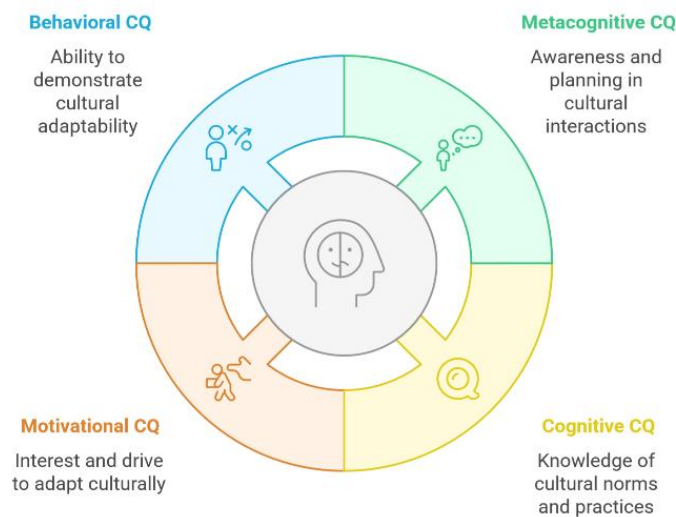
Cross-cultural environments present unique challenges for individuals navigating unfamiliar settings, such as international workplaces, academic exchanges, or migration contexts. Among the difficulties frequently cited are culture shock, miscommunication, and emotional stress. To address these, various constructs have emerged in the literature – in particular cultural intelligence (CQ), intercultural communication, and emotional intelligence (EI) – each offering complementary lenses through which to understand successful adaptation in multicultural environments.

2.1 Cultural Intelligence (CQ)

Cultural intelligence is defined as an individual's capability to adapt to new and unfamiliar cultural settings and to function effectively in culturally diverse environments (Van Dyne et al., 2012). It has been widely recognized as a key factor for effective management in international contexts, including expatriate performance, global leadership, and cross-border collaboration (Barakat et al., 2015). CQ has shown positive associations with outcomes such as cultural adaptation (Deng et al., 2025; Ward et al., 2011), negotiation effectiveness (Imai & Gelfand, 2010), and job performance (Gong et al., 2019).

The CQ scale developed by Earley and Ang (2003) includes four dimensions, as shown in Figure 1, allowing for a comprehensive assessment of individuals' intercultural competence. In organizational settings, high-CQ individuals have been shown to lower conflict, improve team dynamics, and foster stronger cohesion in multicultural environments.

Figure 1. Four dimensions of CQ.



Source: Adapted from Ang & Van Dyne (2008)

CQ has also been linked to job satisfaction in multicultural work environments. Research shows that individuals with higher levels of CQ are better able to adjust to culturally diverse contexts and report higher levels of satisfaction (Barakat et al., 2015). Such individuals are more capable of building effective relationships, navigating cultural differences, and avoiding interpersonal conflict (Van Dyne et al., 2012). Conversely, lower levels of CQ are often associated with dissatisfaction, misunderstandings, and reduced workplace performance (Earley & Ang, 2003).

2.2 Intercultural Communication and Emotional Regulation

In cross-cultural workplaces, effective communication is vital for leadership, teamwork, and customer engagement. The emotional dynamics underlying intercultural communication can make or break organizational effectiveness. Individuals immersed in culturally diverse contexts must navigate different styles of emotional expression and conflict resolution, making emotional intelligence a critical asset. Studies show that EI helps reduce intercultural communication apprehension and improves relational outcomes (Kerr et al., 2006; Vilar Sánchez, 2021).

Intercultural communication must also be approached with an understanding of its fluid nature - cultural contexts and emotional cues evolve continuously (Barker, 2016). The ability to flexibly respond to such dynamics is a hallmark of emotionally intelligent individuals.

2.3 Emotional Intelligence (EI) and Cross-Cultural Adaptation

EI is defined as “a subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions” (Mayer et al., 2016). EI is dynamic and develops over time through learning and exposure. It comprises four core dimensions, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Four core dimensions of EI

Focus	Dimension	Description
Self	Self-Awareness:	Perceiving and recognizing one’s emotions.
	Self-Management:	Regulating and controlling emotional responses.
Others	Social Awareness:	Understanding the emotions of others.
	Social Skills:	Managing interactions, conflict, and relationships.

Source: adapted from Mayer et al. (2002)

The MSCEIT scale (Mayer et al., 2002) is a widely used measure of these dimensions. In the management literature, EI has been linked to leadership effectiveness, team performance, employee engagement, and managerial decision-making (Hess & Bacigalupo, 2010; Wen et al., 2019).

EI also plays a critical role in cross-cultural settings. Higher EI levels are associated with greater cooperation, better stress management, and more effective adaptation in foreign environments (Gullekson & Tucker, 2012; Sundaramoorthy et al., 2024; Tang et al., 2024). EI’s plasticity has also been documented in studies such as Herrera Granda et al. (2023), which found age- and experience-based variation in EI components among university students.

2.4 The Missing Link: EI and Adaptive Strategies

Despite the recognized importance of EI in multicultural contexts, few studies have disaggregated the specific contributions of its subcomponents to the behavioral strategies individuals adopt when adapting to new environments. These strategies include managing uncertainty, forming social connections, navigating workplace norms, and resolving conflicts. The lack of quantitative evidence on this relationship constrains the development of targeted interventions in international talent management and expatriate training.

EI has been broadly associated with effective leadership, interpersonal success, and well-being in organizational contexts (Hess & Bacigalupo, 2010; Wen et al., 2019). In multicultural environments, where ambiguity, emotional dissonance, and communication barriers are prevalent, EI functions as a key enabler of adaptive behavior. Individuals with higher EI are more capable of recognizing emotional cues, regulating their responses, and navigating novel interpersonal dynamics (Mayer et al., 2016). These competencies directly support the use of strategies such as stress management, perspective-taking, and socio-emotional engagement—behaviors critical for cross-cultural adjustment (Harrison & Voelker, 2008). Thus, we propose:

H1: Individuals with higher levels of Emotional Intelligence are more likely to employ adaptive strategies when adapting to a foreign country.

Self-awareness, the ability to accurately perceive and reflect on one’s own emotional states, is foundational to adaptive functioning. In the context of cultural transition, individuals with high self-awareness are more likely to recognize feelings of stress, anxiety, or confusion that emerge from intercultural encounters. This recognition enables them to consciously engage in

behaviors that mitigate those effects, such as seeking clarification, adjusting expectations, or reframing situations positively. Research has shown that emotional clarity is a precursor to successful emotion regulation and adaptive planning (Mayer et al., 2016; Herrera Granda et al., 2023), which leads us to propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Individuals with higher self-awareness are more likely to employ adaptive strategies when adapting to a foreign country.

Self-management involves the capacity to regulate one's emotional responses and impulses, especially under pressure. In foreign environments, which are often perceived as volatile and emotionally charged, this dimension of EI becomes particularly salient. Individuals who can remain calm, redirect negative emotions, and persist through challenges are more likely to engage in problem-solving behaviors and proactive adaptation strategies. Prior studies have linked self-management to lower emotional exhaustion and better social functioning in international contexts (Gullekson & Tucker, 2012). Which led us to propose:

H3: Individuals with higher Self-Management are more likely to employ adaptive strategies when adapting to a foreign country.

Social awareness encompasses the ability to empathize, decode social dynamics, and accurately interpret others' emotions. This is especially crucial in multicultural environments, where norms for emotional expression, power distance, and interaction styles vary widely. Individuals high in social awareness can better interpret these signals and respond appropriately, thereby selecting and using strategies such as observation, mirroring, and context-sensitive engagement (Barker, 2016). Their ability to avoid missteps and foster rapport makes social awareness a key predictor of successful adaptation. Thus, we propose:

H4: Individuals with higher Social Awareness are more likely to employ adaptive strategies when adapting to a foreign country.

Social skills refer to the ability to influence, communicate, build relationships, and manage conflict effectively. In a foreign environment, these skills are indispensable for navigating new organizational systems, forming support networks, and collaborating across cultural boundaries. High social skills enable individuals to initiate contact, seek feedback, resolve misunderstandings diplomatically, and adapt their communication style. Studies consistently find that these behaviors are essential for expatriate success, intercultural leadership, and global teamwork (Wen et al., 2019; Mayer et al., 2016). Which led us to propose:

H5: Individuals with higher Social Skills are more likely to employ adaptive strategies when adapting to a foreign country.

By clarifying the specific links between EI subcomponents and adaptive behaviors, this study contributes to theory development in international management and offers practical implications for global HR practices, leadership development, and intercultural training.

3. Methodology

3.1 Analysis

To test the proposed hypotheses (H1–H5), a quantitative approach was adopted using SPSS (version 29.0.0). Three main statistical methods were employed: Pearson's correlation analysis, simple linear regression (SLR), and multiple linear regression (MLR). These analyses allowed for the examination of both the overall relationship between EI and adaptive strategies, as well as the distinct contributions of each EI dimension. The choice of these methods was informed

by their ability to reveal associations and predict variance in the dependent variable—adaptive strategies - based on the independent variables, i.e., EI and its subcomponents.

For correlation analysis, statistical significance was determined at $p < 0.05$. Regression models were evaluated based on R-values, R-squared (R^2) values, adjusted R^2 , and residual patterns to assess model fit and predictive power. ANOVA was used to compare group means across demographic variables.

3.2 Data Collection

Data were collected over a period of three weeks using an open online survey distributed through professional networks and academic contacts. The survey was designed to capture both quantitative and demographic data from individuals with varying degrees of international experience. Respondents were informed about the academic purpose of the research, and their consent was obtained prior to participation. No personally identifying information was collected, ensuring respondent anonymity and compliance with ethical research standards.

3.3 Instruments

The survey was divided into three sections: demographic questions, the EI scale, and the adaptive strategies scale. The EI measure was based on the MSCEIT (Mayer et al., 2002) model, covering four subscales: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and social skills. Each EI subcomponent was measured using 5 items, for a total of 20 items, rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale.

Reliability testing of the EI subscales produced strong internal consistency: Overall EI ($\alpha = 0.947$), self-awareness ($\alpha = 0.870$), self-management ($\alpha = 0.846$), social awareness ($\alpha = 0.902$), and social skills ($\alpha = 0.911$). These values confirmed that the instrument was suitable for further analysis.

Adaptive strategies were captured using a set of 17 items drawn from literature on intercultural adjustment and communication. Respondents rated the frequency of each strategy on a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (never used) to 7 (frequently used). The questionnaire was pilot-tested prior to launch to ensure clarity and relevance.

3.4 Sample

A total of 192 valid responses were collected from individuals representing 31 nationalities. The average age of participants was 31 years. The sample included both students and working professionals, with varying levels of education and international experience. Respondents were geographically distributed across Europe, North Africa, and parts of Asia, with notable representation from Germany, Morocco, Portugal, France, and the United Kingdom. The sample also included multilingual individuals, most of whom reported speaking at least two languages fluently.

4. Results

H1: Overall Emotional Intelligence and Adaptive Strategies

Pearson's correlation analysis revealed a statistically significant moderate positive relationship between overall EI and adaptive strategies ($r = 0.376$, $p < 0.01$). The simple linear regression model showed that EI explains 14.1% of the variance in strategy use ($R^2 = 0.141$). This clearly indicates that as the level of EI increases, respondents become more likely to adopt and effectively use adaptive strategies.

H2: Self-Awareness and Adaptive Strategies

A weaker but significant positive correlation was found between self-awareness and adaptive strategies ($r = 0.218$, $p < 0.05$). The SLR indicated that 6.6% of the variance in adaptive strategies could be explained by self-awareness ($R^2 = 0.066$). This illustrates that awareness of one's emotions does indeed influence the adoption of adaptive strategies in foreign environments.

H3: Self-Management and Adaptive Strategies

Self-management was moderately correlated with strategy use ($r = 0.329$, $p < 0.01$) and explained 10.2% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.102$). To put it differently, the ability to regulate one's emotions increases the likelihood of employing adaptive strategies successfully.

H4: Social Awareness and Adaptive Strategies

Social Awareness had a similar strength of correlation to Self-Management ($r = 0.321$, $p < 0.01$), explaining 10.3% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.103$). The regression equation was as follows:

$$\text{Adaptive Strategies} = 2.762 + 0.349 \times \text{Social Awareness}$$

This confirms that the better individuals are able to understand and adjust to others' emotions, the more successful they are likely to be in adapting to foreign or multicultural environments.

H5: Social Skills and Adaptive Strategies

Social Skills showed the strongest correlation with strategy use among the four dimensions ($r = 0.413$, $p < 0.01$). The model explained 17.1% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.171$). This again shows that a high level of social skills increases the likelihood of adopting adaptive strategies in foreign environments. This also highlights that elements like communication and conflict resolution contribute to the development of those skills.

Multiple linear regression models including predictors such as age, education, and international experience showed that EI dimensions collectively explained 18.9% of the variance in adaptive strategies (adjusted $R^2 = 0.189$), confirming the centrality of EI in cross-cultural adaptation.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide robust support for the theoretical assumption that EI plays a significant role in enabling individuals to adapt to foreign environments through the use of specific behavioral strategies. Consistent with H1, overall, EI demonstrated a moderate, positive correlation with the use of adaptive strategies. This result aligns with existing literature (Harrison & Voelker, 2008; Mayer et al., 2016), which posits that individuals with higher emotional regulation and perception are better equipped to cope with intercultural stressors and unfamiliar social cues.

When analyzing the dimensions of EI separately, each component showed a significant, positive relationship with the use of adaptation strategies, thereby supporting H2 through H5. The most prominent predictors were Social Skills (H5) and Social Awareness (H4), which emerged as the strongest correlates of adaptive behavior. These findings are theoretically consistent with the role of interpersonal competencies in cross-cultural communication (Arasaratnam, 2006). Socially skilled individuals are more adept at initiating and managing relationships in diverse

cultural contexts, while those high in social awareness can interpret and respond appropriately to subtle emotional and behavioral cues.

H3, which tested the influence of self-management, was also supported, revealing a moderate correlation. This suggests that individuals who can regulate their emotions in high-stress or ambiguous situations are more likely to engage in proactive and constructive adaptation strategies, such as perspective-taking or stress management—key behaviors identified in the intercultural adjustment literature (Gullekson & Tucker, 2012).

H2, related to Self-Awareness, was the weakest but still significant predictor. While self-awareness provides the foundation for other emotional competencies, its direct effect on behavior may be less pronounced. This is congruent with research suggesting that while emotional clarity is essential, it is not always sufficient to drive behavioral change unless combined with regulation and interpersonal competencies (Herrera Granda et al., 2023; Mayer et al., 2016).

Beyond the core hypotheses, exploratory analyses revealed that demographic and experiential variables also influenced the use of adaptive strategies. Younger respondents, as well as individuals with greater international exposure and those who speak multiple languages, reported higher usage of adaptive strategies. These findings reinforce the idea that both trait-based and experiential factors contribute to effective cross-cultural adjustment. Notably, multilingual individuals appeared to demonstrate greater emotional attunement and social competence, suggesting that language proficiency may enhance both social awareness and strategy deployment.

These results carry important implications for theory and practice. Theoretically, the study adds granularity to existing models of EI by demonstrating the unique predictive power of each subcomponent in a cross-cultural setting. It contributes to bridging the conceptual gap between emotional intelligence and intercultural competence by showing that the behavioral strategies used in adaptation are emotionally grounded.

Practically, the findings underline the value of developing EI competencies—particularly social skills and social awareness—within global talent development programs, expatriate preparation, and cross-cultural leadership training. Organizations operating internationally would benefit from identifying and cultivating these emotional capacities to support more effective global mobility and integration.

In sum, this study affirms that emotional intelligence is not only a valuable personal resource but a strategic competency for thriving in diverse organizational and cultural environments. Its malleability further suggests that investments in training can yield meaningful gains in intercultural adaptation.

6. Conclusions

This study explored the relationship between EI and the use of adaptive strategies in foreign environments, a topic increasingly relevant in the context of globalization and cross-cultural workforce mobility. Grounded in the Ability Model of EI (Mayer et al., 2016), the study addressed how the four subcomponents, namely self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and social skills, influence individuals' capacity to adapt effectively across cultures.

The findings empirically confirmed that individuals with higher levels of EI are significantly more likely to employ adaptive strategies. Among the dimensions, social skills and social awareness were the strongest predictors, while self-management and self-awareness also showed significant, though comparatively moderate, effects. These results support the theoretical linkage between EI and intercultural competence and provide evidence that each component of EI contributes uniquely to behavioral adaptation.

While the study confirms the positive role of EI in intercultural adaptation, it also highlights areas for further research, such as deeper analysis of contextual moderators (e.g., type of international exposure or specific cultural settings), and the need for advanced statistical techniques like factor analysis to refine construct validity.

These findings contribute to the literature by specifying how distinct emotional competencies influence adaptation behaviors, offering a more granular understanding than studies treating EI as a single construct. From a management perspective, the results reinforce the importance of EI as a trainable, strategic asset in international assignments, global leadership, and culturally diverse teams.

In sum, the study provides empirical support for the proposition that EI is a key enabler of cross-cultural adaptability and that its specific subcomponents play differentiated roles in shaping individuals' responses to foreign environments.

This research underscores the strategic importance of developing EI across organizational levels—not only to enhance individual adaptation, but also to foster more inclusive, resilient, and effective global organizations. Investing in EI is not a luxury but a necessity for navigating the emotional complexity of international work and intercultural collaboration.

6.1 Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. The absence of factor analysis constrained the ability to explore the nuanced relationships among subcomponents of EI and clusters of adaptive behaviors. Employing confirmatory factor analysis in future studies could provide deeper insight into the structural validity of the constructs. Additionally, the cross-sectional design does not allow for causal inferences or the examination of EI development over time. Longitudinal research could better capture how exposure to foreign environments enhances or reshapes emotional intelligence.

Future research could also examine moderating variables such as cultural distance, the nature of international assignments (e.g., short-term vs. long-term), or personality traits. Exploring how organizational support systems interact with emotional competencies may also provide practical guidance for designing more effective expatriate support programs.

6.2 Implications for Practice

The results offer actionable insights for managers, HR professionals, and international educators. Training programs focused on developing specific EI subcomponents—particularly social awareness and social skills—can directly enhance individuals' adaptive capabilities in multicultural environments. Organizations engaged in global operations should integrate EI assessments and development plans into their leadership pipelines, expatriate preparation, and onboarding processes.

In practical terms, EI development should be embedded into coaching, simulation-based training, and mentoring programs that target real-world intercultural challenges. Furthermore, the finding that EI is a dynamic, trainable skill supports the inclusion of emotional competencies in educational curricula for globally mobile professionals.

By prioritizing EI in their talent development strategies, organizations can foster more agile, empathetic, and globally competent teams—capable not only of adjusting to change, but of thriving in complex, intercultural environments.

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