

# Application of Business English in Cross-border E-commerce Negotiations

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**Abstract:** With the rapid development of global e-commerce, cross-border e-commerce has become a crucial component in international trade. As the universal language during international business communication, the application strategies of business English directly affect negotiation efficiency and transaction success rates. Taking major cross-border e-commerce platforms such as Alibaba International and Amazon as examples, this paper conducts an in-depth analysis of the business English strategies employed by buyers and sellers during negotiations. The study finds that key linguistic elements for successful negotiations include the accurate use of professional terminology (e.g., trade terms like FOB and CIF), cultural adaptability in polite language (such as avoiding direct negation and adopting euphemistic expressions), and clear statement of contract clauses. However, current practices still face issues such as misuse of terminology, pragmatic failures caused by cultural differences, and ambiguities in clauses. This research provides systematic language strategy recommendations for cross-border e-commerce practitioners. Enhancing the application of business English can significantly improve negotiation efficiency, reduce transaction risks, and ultimately promote high-quality international business cooperation.

**Keywords:** Business English; Cross-border e-commerce; Negotiation strategies; Contract clauses

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, driven by the booming digital economy and the deepening of global trade integration, cross-border e-commerce has emerged as a vital engine for the growth of international trade. According to customs statistics, China's cross-border e-commerce import and export volume exceeded 2 trillion yuan for the first time in 2022, with a year-on-year growth of 7.1%, demonstrating strong momentum. However, amid the rapid expansion of cross-border e-commerce, international trade entities face more complex challenges in business negotiations compared to traditional trade. Due to differences in cultural backgrounds, legal systems, and language environments between buyers and sellers, issues such as communication barriers, misuse of terminology, and contract disputes occur frequently, severely affecting transaction efficiency and cooperation quality.

In this context, the standardization, professionalism and cross-cultural adaptability of business English—as the universal language for international business activities—are particularly important. Only by continuously improving our business English proficiency can we remain competitive in the fierce international business landscape<sup>[1]</sup>. Studies show

that approximately 65% of cross-border e-commerce disputes stem from language communication issues, including both misuse of professional terminology and pragmatic failures caused by cultural differences. Therefore, systematically studying the application status of business English on cross-border e-commerce platforms (such as Alibaba International and Amazon) and exploring effective ways to optimize language strategies hold significant theoretical and practical value for enhancing the negotiation capabilities of international trade entities and reducing transaction risks. This paper focuses on the application of business English on cross-border e-commerce platforms (e.g., Alibaba International) and discusses how to improve negotiation success rates by optimizing language strategies.

## 2. Characteristics of business English in cross-border e-commerce negotiations

### 2.1. Professionalism and conciseness of trade terms

Language and negotiations both aim at communication. Therefore, when using professional terms, it is crucial to ensure accuracy to avoid unnecessary troubles <sup>[2]</sup>. In cross-border e-commerce negotiations, the professionalism and conciseness of business English are vital, as they directly affect the clarity of transaction terms, negotiation efficiency, and risk control. International trade involves complex processes, including logistics, payment, customs clearance, and taxation. The precise use of standardized trade terms and industry abbreviations can significantly reduce communication misunderstandings. Meanwhile, to improve communication efficiency, business English usually adopts a concise language style <sup>[3]</sup>. For example:

Trade terms: FOB (Free on Board), CIF (Cost, Insurance and Freight)

Payment methods: T/T (Telegraphic Transfer), L/C (Letter of Credit)

Logistics terms: DDP (Delivered Duty Paid), EXW (Ex Works)

E-commerce terms: B2C (Business to Customer), CPS (Cost Per Sale)

As an integral part of the price clause in sales contracts, trade terms determine the commodity price, the division of key responsibilities and costs between buyers and sellers, and to some extent, the nature of the contract <sup>[4]</sup>. Professional trade terms can prevent disputes caused by unclear responsibility definitions. For instance, if a seller fails to clearly specify FOB or CIF when quoting on Alibaba International, the buyer may mistakenly assume freight is included, leading to disputes. Conversely, concise language enhances communication efficiency, reduces risks, and helps enterprises expand into global markets effectively.

### 2.2. Polite language and cross-cultural communication

Cross-cultural communication can occur between countries, ethnic groups, or individuals, covering aspects such as daily habits, politeness, appellations, values, and political views <sup>[5]</sup>. Business English in cross-border e-commerce negotiations also requires cross-cultural communication skills. Respecting cultural differences between partners and oneself not only shows respect to the other party but also avoids unnecessary troubles caused by cultural differences <sup>[6]</sup>. Therefore, in cross-cultural communication, it is necessary to balance politeness and efficiency, strive to create a good negotiation atmosphere, avoid making the other party uncomfortable, and prevent the negotiation from reaching a deadlock. Common strategies include:

Euphemistic expression:

✗ “You must pay on time.”

✓ “We kindly request timely payment to ensure smooth processing.”

The original sentence uses an imperative tone, which easily makes customers feel pressured, lacks understanding and respect for the customer’s position, and may trigger the customer’s defensive psychology, affecting the cooperative relationship. The optimized expression replaces “must” with “kindly request,” transforming the order into a polite request. It also supplements the reason (“ensure smooth processing”) to help customers understand the necessity of timely payment. Finally, using “we” as the subject reflects shared responsibility rather than a one-sided requirement.

Positive wording:

✗ “Your order is delayed.”

✓ “We are working to expedite your order and will update you shortly.”

The original sentence only states negative facts without providing solutions and uses the passive voice, which seems to shirk responsibility, potentially causing customer anxiety and distrust. The optimized version uses the present continuous tense (“are working”) to emphasize ongoing actions. The word “expedite” is professional and positive, demonstrating determination to speed up processing, and promises follow-up updates (“will update”), giving customers a sense of security.

### 2.3. Clear expression of contract clauses

A comprehensive contract can ensure that the interests of both parties in the trade process are protected and avoid disputes caused by misunderstandings or ambiguities<sup>[7]</sup>. Contract clauses can accurately define the responsibilities and obligations of each party, enabling all participants to have a common understanding of the tasks they need to complete. This not only helps prevent disputes due to differing interpretations but also allows all parties to follow rules during contract execution, avoiding unnecessary misunderstandings. Cross-border e-commerce contracts usually involve terms such as payment, delivery, and returns, so their expression must be rigorous. For example:

Vague expression: “The goods will be shipped soon.”

Optimized expression: “The goods will be shipped within 7 business days after payment confirmation.”

In business negotiations, people want to save time, so they should try to use precise words when expressing their ideas<sup>[8]</sup>. The original sentence has a vague time concept: “soon” is a subjective expression without a specific time frame. Different cultures may interpret “soon” as ranging from 3 days to 3 weeks, which may lead to understanding differences. Additionally, it fails to specify necessary conditions such as payment confirmation, which may result in failed customer expectation management and subsequent disputes. The optimized version clarifies the time range with “within 7 business days” to establish clear expectations, sets a clear premise by defining the execution condition with “after payment confirmation,” and uses the professional term “business days” to avoid misunderstandings about weekends/holidays. Finally, it provides a verifiable time commitment to enhance credibility.

## 3. Language issues in current cross-border e-commerce negotiations

### 3.1. Communication barriers caused by misuse of terms

Trade terms not only involve complex legal and economic concepts but also carry specific operational procedures and responsibility allocations. In addition, some sellers, due to their limited English proficiency, misuse trade terms, such as confusing FOB and CIF, leading to logistics liability disputes. Through business English, lawyers and business personnel can express legal viewpoints more accurately, providing strong legal support for the resolution of disputes<sup>[9]</sup>. Trade terms like “FOB” and “CIF” have clear definitions and scopes of application. If one party uses the wrong term or has an inaccurate understanding of its definition, it may lead to differences between the two parties regarding issues such as the place of delivery, mode of transportation, and insurance liability.

### 3.2. Misunderstandings arising from cultural differences

The concept of high-context and low-context cultures was first proposed by American anthropologist Edward T. Hall<sup>[10]</sup>. In high-context cultures, information transmission relies more on context and non-verbal factors, while in low-context cultures, information depends more on the language and words themselves<sup>[11]</sup>. Since China is a high-context culture, communication and interaction rely on implicit meanings and non-verbal cues, whereas the United States and Germany belong to low-context cultures and prefer explicit expressions. American business emails are usually straightforward and focus on efficiency, while emails from East Asian countries may be more euphemistic, emphasizing politeness

and relationship maintenance. For example, an American client may interpret a Chinese partner's "may need further discussion" (which is actually a euphemistic refusal) as a positive signal, leading to subsequent misunderstandings.

In addition to language itself, non-verbal communication (such as body language, facial expressions and silence) also varies across cultures. For instance, in some Asian countries, nodding does not necessarily mean agreement but indicates that the other party is listening. In Western cultures, however, nodding is usually regarded as a clear affirmative response. Such differences may cause one party to misunderstand the other's attitude or intentions. Moreover, some Asian sellers are accustomed to using indirect expressions (such as "Maybe we can consider..."), while European and American buyers prefer direct communication, which may result in low negotiation efficiency.

### **3.3. Non-standard contract expressions**

In business negotiations, non-standard contract expressions may lead to inconsistent understandings of terms between the two parties, thereby triggering disputes, performance obstacles, and even legal disputes. Business English can ensure that contracts comply with international trade practices and legal requirements, providing legal protection for both parties<sup>[12]</sup>. For example, a contract stipulates that "the supplier shall deliver the goods as soon as possible" but fails to specify a specific time. Such vague or ambiguous language is prone to causing misunderstandings. In addition, some small and medium-sized enterprises use template contracts but fail to adjust the terms according to specific transactions, which also easily leads to legal disputes.

## **4. Optimizing business English strategies for cross-border e-commerce negotiations**

### **4.1. Strengthening professional terminology training and establish industry databases**

In cross-border e-commerce negotiations and contract signing, the accurate understanding and standardized use of professional terminology are fundamental guarantees for the smooth development of business cooperation. Since international trade involves different jurisdictions, cultural backgrounds, and business practices, misuse or misunderstanding of terminology often leads to significant legal and commercial risks. According to a 2022 survey report by the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC), approximately 23% of cross-border trade disputes stem from improper use of trade terms, among which confusion between FOB and CIF clauses accounts for the highest proportion, reaching 37%.

To effectively address this issue, enterprises should establish a systematic professional terminology training mechanism. Firstly, it is recommended to organize regular business English training courses, focusing on the following contents: 1) A detailed interpretation of the Incoterms 2020<sup>[13]</sup>, with particular emphasis on the risk division points and liability boundaries between buyers and sellers under different trade terms; 2) The unique business terms and rule systems of cross-border e-commerce platforms (such as Alibaba International, Amazon, etc.); 3) Professional expressions related to international payment methods (such as letters of credit, collection, etc.); 4) Standard English expressions for key clauses such as commodity inspection, insurance, and arbitration.

Secondly, it is advisable to establish an industry-shared professional terminology database. This database should include: 1) A multilingual comparative dictionary of trade terms; 2) A library of typical contract clause templates; 3) A collection of common terminology misuse cases; 4) Explanations of differences in terminology interpretation under different jurisdictions. For example, there are significant differences in the interpretation of certain commercial terms between the U.S. Uniform Commercial Code (UCC) and the United Nations Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods (CISG). In addition, training should focus on practical application, helping business personnel deeply understand the specific use of terminology in different scenarios through simulated negotiations, case studies, and other methods. Studies have shown that business personnel who have received systematic terminology training can improve contract negotiation efficiency by more than 40% and reduce the incidence of disputes by approximately 35%. Enterprises may also consider introducing automatic terminology verification tools to provide real-time prompts for potential

terminology errors during email communication and contract drafting, thereby improving the accuracy of terminology use from a technical perspective.

## **4.2. Adopting communication styles suitable for target markets**

In cross-border e-commerce marketing, to achieve cross-cultural communication, corresponding marketing strategies should be formulated based on the personality characteristics and specific differences of consumers in different regions<sup>[14]</sup>. Effective cross-cultural communication requires not only language skills but also an in-depth understanding of the business culture and communication preferences of different regions. Firstly, we need to understand the communication preferences of the target market. For example, European and American markets deliver information directly and clearly, strictly follow timelines and attach much importance on efficiency, with less reliance on context, preferring data-supported rational decision-making. When communicating via email with clients from such target markets, adopt the “BLUF” principle (Bottom Line Up Front), stating the core demands in the first paragraph. In negotiations, use specific data more often, such as: “Our sales data shows 35% growth in Q2, supporting this pricing strategy”; clarify timeframes: “We propose to conclude the agreement by March 15th”; avoid overusing modifiers and state issues directly: “The delivery delay caused 12% order cancellation”. In contrast, Middle Eastern and Asian markets emphasize indirect expression, relationship building, and non-verbal signals. Trust building precedes business negotiations, and they are relationship-oriented, with longer decision-making processes that require multi-party coordination. Therefore, it is recommended to avoid direct negation, use more euphemistic expressions and polite language, and prioritize building trust to win the favor of the other party.

## **4.3. Optimizing contract language**

In cross-border e-commerce transactions, contracts are the core legal documents that protect the rights and interests of both buyers and sellers. Due to factors such as transnational transactions, multi-jurisdictional compliance, and cultural differences, contract language must simultaneously meet the requirements of legal rigor, cross-cultural adaptability, and enforceability, while avoiding ambiguities and potential disputes. On one hand, we can use standardized contract templates (such as the “e-Credit” payment terms on Alibaba International Station). On the other hand, we can hire professional legal counsel to review key clauses, such as those related to intellectual property and liability for breach of contract. This not only ensures that the interests of both parties are protected during the transaction process but also provides strong legal support for possible disputes<sup>[15]</sup>. For example, when a cross-border e-commerce seller signs a contract with a U.S. buyer:

- 1) Applicable law: Clearly specify the application of the U.S. Uniform Commercial Code (UCC) and exclude the United Nations Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods (CISG) to avoid complex interpretations.
- 2) Quality inspection clause: Stipulate “SGS inspection at Chinese port before shipment, with re-inspection rights at US port”.
- 3) Payment security: Use Escrow services and stipulate “70% payment after inspection, 30% after installation”.

## **5. Conclusion**

As the core communication tool in cross-border e-commerce negotiations, the standardization, professionalism and cross-cultural adaptability of business English directly affect negotiation efficiency and transaction success rates. Through case analysis of cross-border e-commerce platforms such as Alibaba International Station, this study reveals the key role of business English in negotiations, current problems and proposes systematic optimization strategies. The research finds that the accurate use of professional terminology, culturally appropriate polite expressions and rigorous formulation of contract clauses are the three major linguistic elements that improve the quality of negotiations. However, issues such as misuse of terminology, pragmatic failures caused by cultural differences and insufficient application of intelligent technologies

remain the main bottlenecks hindering efficient cross-border e-commerce negotiations.

To address these problems, this study proposes multi-dimensional optimization paths: First, we should strengthen standardized training on international trade terms (such as Incoterms® 2020) and establish an industry terminology database; second, it is necessary to formulate differentiated cross-cultural communication guidelines to cultivate negotiators' cultural sensitivity; finally, optimize contract language. These strategies can not only enhance the application effectiveness of business English but also significantly reduce transaction risks and promote the sustainable development of cross-border trade.

Future research can further explore the synergistic effect of multimodal business communication (such as linguistic and non-linguistic elements in video negotiations). With the deepening development of global digital trade, the improvement of business English proficiency will increasingly become the core competitiveness of cross-border e-commerce enterprises, and relevant research results will also provide important references for improving the international trade language service system.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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