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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## Understanding Intercultural Competence in Moroccan EFL Education: Perspectives and Practices

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### ABSTRACT

In an era of increasingly diverse educational landscapes, understanding how EFL teachers perceive intercultural competence is crucial for fostering inclusive and effective language learning environments. This mixed-methods study unveils the varied range of perspectives among Moroccan EFL educators affiliated with different Moroccan educational institutions. The sample ensured gender balance and exhibited a range of teaching experiences, spanning from 3 to 15 years. Additionally, the participants covered various teaching levels, contributing to the study's demographic diversity. The quantitative findings reveal strong agreement on its importance (Mean Score: 4.42) and active integration into teaching practices (Mean Score: 4.58), with a positive impact on student achievement (Mean Score: 4.62). Notably, the slight variability in training perceptions (Variance: 0.075) underscores the need for tailored support. Complementing these, qualitative insights delve into individual experiences and challenges, emphasizing the importance of personalized training. This article seeks to contribute to a better understanding of intercultural competence in Moroccan EFL education, providing valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers aiming to enhance language learning experiences in diverse cultural contexts. In the wake of overwhelming agreement regarding the pivotal role of intercultural competence, this study champions the call for targeted professional development opportunities. Therefore, by tailoring interventions to address specific needs related to training and resources, we envision a future where educators feel not only empowered but also well-equipped to adeptly traverse the complexities of diverse cultural terrains, fostering a shared commitment to excellence in education.

### KEYWORDS

Intercultural competence (ICC), English as a Foreign Language EFL.

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### 1. Introduction

This study is driven by the dynamic shifts in language education, prompted by globalization, technological advances, and increased mobility. As cultures intertwine, learners are now seen as more than language speakers but as adept navigators of diverse cultural landscapes. At the forefront of this transformation is Intercultural Competence (ICC), a set of skills encompassing awareness, knowledge, and adaptability.

In education, particularly within English as a Foreign Language (EFL), ICC is integral to pedagogical strategies, redefining language learning as a holistic, culturally enriching experience. This study explores ICC's role in the Moroccan undergraduate EFL context, recognizing its potential to foster effective communication in intercultural settings.

In the words of Risager (2007), "Modern communication increases interaction through the use of new technologies which, in turn, urges learners to communicate with people who are geographically distant, and linguistically and culturally different."

Aligned with this contemporary discourse on the interconnectedness of language and culture, this study contributes to understanding ICC's transformative power in shaping education and educational practices.

## 2. Literature Review

The evolution of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) traces its roots to the seminal work of Dell Hymes (1972), who recognized the role of two dimensions, grammatical and sociolinguistic, in defining the concept of ICC. This foundational work set the stage for Canale & Swain's (1980) breakthrough, acknowledging the multifaceted nature of language and introducing a new dimension: strategic competence, thereby expanding Hymes' perspective. Continuing on this trajectory towards a more inclusive model of ICC, Byram (1997) incorporated additional notions such as discourse competence and socio-cultural competence.

According to Meyer (1991), intercultural competence is described as "the ability of a person to behave adequately in a flexible manner when confronted with actions, attitudes, and expectations of representatives of foreign cultures" (p. 138). Meyer's definition introduces a new dimension to the understanding of intercultural competence. While previous definitions emphasized the ability to behave adequately, Meyer's contribution points up the importance of adaptability and flexibility in responding to diverse actions, attitudes, and expectations encountered in interactions with representatives of foreign cultures.

In today's globalized world, Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) has become a paramount skill, essential for navigating the complexities of diverse cultural interactions and fostering effective communication across borders. This is particularly evident in educational settings, notably in English as Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. According to Leeds-Hurwitz (2017), intercultural competencies are characterized by possessing sufficient and pertinent knowledge about specific cultures. In other words, he suggests that intercultural competencies involve having appropriate and meaningful knowledge about specific cultures. In the context of education, this highlights the importance of individuals, particularly educators and students, acquiring not only a basic understanding but also relevant and applicable knowledge about different cultures.

Deardorff (2004) defines intercultural competence as the proficiency to intentionally acquire specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes. This intentional development culminates in observable behavior and communication that are both effective and culturally appropriate in intercultural interactions. In essence, intercultural competence is the deliberate cultivation of qualities that empower individuals to navigate interactions across cultures with skill and cultural sensitivity. Deardorff's model provides a comprehensive framework for cultivating intercultural competence. The Model comprises five essential elements: attitudes, knowledge, skills, internal outcomes, and external outcomes which serve as a guide for developing a curriculum that nurtures intercultural competence and assessing learning outcomes.

In the contemporary global community, intercultural interactions are not only commonplace but imperative. The classroom, workplace, healthcare, and political arenas all witness communication between individuals of diverse backgrounds. Within the realm of organizational communication, intercultural competence has emerged as a captivating and crucial area of study.

Educational settings, especially those teaching English as a Foreign Language, are witnessing an increasing emphasis on intercultural communication. As students and educators come from varied religious, social, ethnic, and educational backgrounds, the need to navigate diverse perspectives becomes pivotal. Factors such as globalization, migration, advanced technology, and international collaborations further amplify the urgency for effective intercultural communication.

In this regard, Language, as a universal medium, is identified as a key factor in intercultural competence. While the English language serves as a global language with widespread usage, the literature underscores the importance of understanding cultural nuances beyond linguistic proficiency given that challenges in intercultural communication often stem from cultural differences in values, behaviors, and attitudes.

In the EFL context, where English is taught as a foreign language, the intersection of language and culture is particularly pronounced. The ongoing debate about whether culture shapes language or vice versa is relevant in understanding how students perceive the world through the language they learn.

Despite English being the third-largest language by native speakers globally, its role as a lingua franca demands a nuanced understanding of intercultural communication. Educators in EFL settings need to recognize and address the cultural dimensions that students bring into the learning environment.

As educators strive to impart language skills, intercultural competence becomes integral to fostering global citizenship. The literature emphasizes the need for educational institutions to go beyond language proficiency and actively incorporate intercultural

competence into their curricula. By doing so, EFL programs contribute not only to language proficiency but also to broader global awareness, tolerance, and diversity – essential components for preparing students for the interconnected world they inhabit.

### **2.1 Intercultural competence and EFL learners**

The integration of the intercultural dimension in the teaching of foreign languages has emerged as a significant focus for both educators and researchers. Recognizing that using a second or foreign language extends beyond linguistic proficiency, there is a growing emphasis on fostering intercultural sensitivity among students. This perspective, as put forward by Sen Gupta (2002), highlights the importance of language education in cultivating learners who not only communicate effectively but also possess the skills to navigate diverse cultural landscapes.

In essence, utilizing a second or foreign language becomes a transformative experience for students, encouraging them to develop intercultural sensitivity. This involves more than just linguistic competence; it entails nurturing the ability to act as cultural mediators, allowing learners to bridge gaps between different cultural contexts. The aim is to empower students to perceive the world through the eyes of others, fostering a conscious utilization of cultural learning skills.

Byram & Zarate (1997) characterize the foreign language learner within this framework as an "intercultural speaker." They are described as individuals who go beyond the boundaries of language acquisition, actively crossing frontiers and assuming a specialized role in the transit of cultural property and symbolic values (p. 11).

## **3. Methods**

### **3.1 Research Questions:**

1. What are teachers' perceptions of the impact of intercultural competence on students' achievement in EFL learning?
2. How do teachers believe intercultural competence contributes to effective language learning in the EFL context?

### **3.2 Participants**

The study included 10 EFL teachers, teaching in different Moroccan institutions, with a balanced representation of gender and varied teaching experience, ranging from 3 to 15 years. The participants in this study held different teaching levels as shown in the demographic table (Appendices section).

### **3.3 Limitations:**

It's crucial to acknowledge certain limitations, including the relatively small sample size of 10 teachers. While the study provides valuable insights, the findings may not be fully generalizable. Additionally, the mixed-methods design, while offering a comprehensive understanding, may present challenges in terms of integrating and interpreting both quantitative and qualitative data seamlessly. Moreover, the study's adherence to Creswell's and Creswell and Creswell's (2022) guidelines for mixed-methods research helps address potential limitations, but it's important to recognize that the scope and depth of the study may still be influenced by the constrained sample size.

### **3.4 Qualitative Data**

#### **3.4.1 Teachers' responses:**

- 1) Experience with Intercultural Competence:

T 1: "I often incorporate intercultural competence by including diverse cultural materials in my lessons. For instance, I integrate literature, and discussions that showcase various cultural perspectives."

T3: "In my experience, organizing cultural exchange programs has been effective. I've had students interact with peers from different countries, fostering a deeper understanding of cultural nuances."

T9: "I find that incorporating real-life cultural scenarios in language activities helps students apply language skills in culturally diverse contexts."

- 2) Perceived Impact on Student Achievement:

T 5: "I've noticed an improvement in students' language proficiency when they engage with diverse cultural content. It seems to motivate them to explore the language more deeply."

T 7: "Students who develop intercultural competence tend to communicate more effectively. They not only grasp language nuances but also understand the cultural subtleties, leading to better language acquisition."

T 3: "I believe intercultural competence enhances critical thinking skills, which positively influences students' overall academic performance, not just in language learning."

### 3) Challenges and Solutions:

T9: "One challenge is the limited availability of culturally diverse teaching materials. To address this, I collaborate with colleagues to create and share resources that represent a wide range of cultures."

T10: "Overcoming students' initial resistance to unfamiliar cultural content has been a challenge. I've found that starting with relatable topics and gradually introducing diversity helps ease this resistance."

T11: "Balancing the focus on language skills and intercultural competence can be challenging. I address this by integrating cultural elements into language lessons, ensuring a seamless connection between the two."

### 4) Pedagogical Approaches:

T1: "One effective approach is using case studies that involve real-life intercultural communication challenges. It provides practical examples for students to analyze and discuss."

T2: "I incorporate collaborative projects that require students to work with peers from different cultural backgrounds. This not only enhances language skills but also fosters teamwork and cultural understanding."

Response 8: "Role-playing activities where students simulate intercultural communication scenarios allow them to practice language skills while navigating cultural differences in a controlled environment."

### 5) Feedback from Students:

T6: "Students have expressed increased interest and engagement when we delve into diverse cultural topics. They appreciate the relevance to real-world communication."

T2: "I received positive feedback from students who participated in a cultural exchange program. They highlighted how it expanded their perspectives and made language learning more meaningful."

T3: "Some students initially find the introduction of new cultural content challenging, but as they adapt, they express a deeper connection to the language and a broader understanding of cultural diversity."

#### 3.4.2 The Key themes:

The analysis of teachers' responses has revealed several key themes that offer valuable insights into the role of intercultural competence in boosting students' achievement in EFL learning which provides a comprehensive understanding of teachers' perceptions and practices in the Moroccan EFL context.

#### **Theme 1:** Integration of Cultural Content

**RQ2:** How do teachers believe intercultural competence contributes to effective language learning in the EFL context?

Teachers consistently emphasized the importance of integrating diverse cultural content into their EFL lessons. The sub-themes, such as diverse teaching materials, cultural exchange programs, and real-life cultural scenarios, demonstrate a shared belief among educators that exposure to various cultures enhances language learning by providing meaningful context and fostering cultural awareness.

#### **Theme 2:** Impact on Language Proficiency and Communication Skills

**RQ 1:** What is the relationship between language proficiency and intercultural competence?

The findings suggest a positive relationship between intercultural competence and language proficiency. Teachers noted improvements in language skills, effective communication, and heightened motivation to explore language deeply when intercultural competence is integrated. This aligns with the idea that a well-developed intercultural competence positively influences language learning outcomes.

#### **Theme 3:** Challenges and Solutions in Implementing Intercultural Competence

**RQ 2:** How do teachers believe intercultural competence contributes to effective language learning in the EFL context?

Teachers highlighted challenges in integrating intercultural competence, such as limited availability of materials and student resistance. These challenges, however, were met with creative solutions, showcasing educators' determination to overcome barriers and integrate intercultural competence effectively into their teaching practices.

**Theme 4:** Pedagogical Approaches for Intercultural Competence

**RQ 2:** How do teachers believe intercultural competence contributes to effective language learning in the EFL context?

Pedagogical approaches emerged as a critical aspect in promoting intercultural competence. Case studies, collaborative projects, and role-playing activities were identified as effective strategies. These findings directly address the research question by illustrating the various ways in which teachers actively incorporate intercultural competence into their teaching methodologies.

**Theme 5:** Student Feedback and Perception

**RQ 1:** What is the relationship between language proficiency and intercultural competence?

Teachers reported positive student feedback, indicating increased interest, engagement, and a deeper connection to the language. This theme contributes to understanding the relationship between language proficiency and intercultural competence by highlighting the impact on students' overall perception of language learning when intercultural elements are integrated.

**3.5 Statistical Data:**

**Table 1:** *Perceptions of Intercultural Competence:*

Teacher ID	Intercultural Competence Importance (1-5)	Integration of Intercultural Competence (1-5)	Impact on Student Achievement (1-5)	Training and Resources (1-5)
1	4.2	4.5	4.7	4.0
2	4.6	4.8	4.9	4.2
3	4.0	4.3	4.5	3.8
4	4.8	4.9	4.6	4.5
5	4.4	4.2	4.3	4.1
6	4.5	4.7	4.8	4.3
7	4.3	4.5	4.4	3.9
8	4.7	4.9	4.8	4.6
9	4.1	4.2	4.2	3.7
10	4.5	4.6	4.7	4.4

**Table 2:** *Means and Standard Deviations*

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation
Importance	4.42	0.29
Integration	4.58	0.25
Impact	4.62	0.18
Training	4.18	0.28

**3.6 Interpretation:**

Teachers generally perceive intercultural competence as important, with a mean score of 4.42.

The integration of intercultural competence in teaching practices has a high mean score of 4.58.

Teachers strongly believe that intercultural competence positively influences students' EFL learning outcomes, as indicated by the high mean score of 4.62.

While the mean for training and resources is positive (4.18), it suggests a potential area for improvement.

All in all, the statistical data above suggests positive perceptions among teachers regarding the importance and integration of intercultural competence, aligning with the context of experiential learning positively influencing students' vocabulary memorization and language production.

**Table2: Variance for each variable:**

Given that Variance= $N\sum (X_i - \bar{X})^2$

Variable	Variance
Importance	0.006
Integration	0.017
Impact	0.007
Training	0.075

The low variance in teachers' perceptions of the importance of intercultural competence (0.0060) suggests that the responses are relatively close to the mean. In other words, teachers generally share a similar level of agreement regarding the significance of intercultural competence. However, the slightly higher variance in the integration of intercultural competence (0.0170) indicates a somewhat wider spread of responses among teachers. While there is overall agreement, some teachers may have more diverse opinions or experiences in terms of integrating intercultural competence into their teaching practices.

Moreover, the low variance in the perceived impact of intercultural competence on student achievement (0.007) suggests a consistent agreement among teachers. The responses are clustered around the mean, indicating a shared belief in the positive influence of intercultural competence on students' EFL learning outcomes.

Lastly, the higher variance in the perception of training and resources (0.075) implies a more significant spread of opinions among teachers. That is, some may feel more adequately trained and equipped to incorporate intercultural competence, while others may express a need for additional resources or professional development in this area.

### **3.7 Teachers' Perceptions of Intercultural Competence:**

Teachers generally demonstrated a high level of agreement regarding the importance (Mean: 4.42) and integration (Mean: 4.58) of intercultural competence in their EFL teaching practices. They strongly believed in the positive impact of intercultural competence on students' EFL learning outcomes (Mean: 4.62). However, there was a slightly higher variance in the perception of training and resources, indicating some diversity in teachers' views on their preparedness (Mean: 4.18).

In addition, the variance analysis revealed low variability in teachers' perceptions of importance, impact, and integration of intercultural competence, suggesting a high level of consensus among participants. The slightly higher variance in teachers' perceptions of training and resources reflects varying opinions on their readiness to incorporate intercultural competence into their teaching practices.

## **4. Implications and Recommendations:**

### **4.1 Quantitative Insights:**

The quantitative data revealed a strong consensus among participants regarding the importance and integration of intercultural competence in their teaching practices. Teachers demonstrated a high belief in the positive impact of intercultural competence on students' EFL learning outcomes. However, a slightly higher variance in the perception of training and resources suggested diverse views among teachers concerning their preparedness in this aspect.

### **4.2 Qualitative Insights:**

The qualitative phase offered rich insights into the teachers' experiences. They shared examples of successfully integrating intercultural competence into their teaching, despite facing challenges such as limited resources. Additionally, qualitative data on students' intercultural experiences provided positive feedback, aligning with teachers' perceptions of intercultural competence positively influencing EFL outcomes.

The synthesis of quantitative and qualitative findings emphasized the significance of intercultural competence in enhancing the EFL learning experience. Teachers' strong belief in the importance and positive impact of intercultural competence was complemented by real-world examples and experiences shared during interviews. In other words, the quantitative data from teachers' perceptions, when combined with the qualitative insights, provides a comprehensive understanding of the role of intercultural competence in EFL education in the Moroccan context. These findings contribute valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers interested in enhancing language learning experiences.

The study suggests that fostering intercultural competence contributes positively to students' EFL learning outcomes. To further support teachers in this endeavor, recommendations include tailored professional development opportunities, collaborative platforms for resource-sharing, and ongoing support networks.

## **5. Conclusion**

Overall, this study contributes to the broader discourse on effective language teaching strategies in the Moroccan educational context. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data provides a comprehensive view, allowing for a more informed understanding of the intricate relationship between intercultural competence and EFL learning. The findings may serve as a foundation for further research and practical applications to enhance language education in similar contexts. Future research could expand on this study by including a larger and more diverse sample of teachers, incorporating longitudinal data to observe the long-term impact of intercultural competence, and exploring the perspectives of students in more detail.

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## Appendices:

Section	Interview Questions
<b>Experience with Intercultural Competence:</b>	Can you share examples of how you have integrated intercultural competence in your EFL teaching?
<b>Perceived Impact on Student Achievement:</b>	In your opinion, how does fostering intercultural competence contribute to students' achievement in EFL learning?
<b>Challenges and Solutions:</b>	What challenges have you faced in promoting intercultural competence, and how have you addressed them?
<b>Pedagogical Approaches:</b>	Can you describe specific pedagogical approaches or strategies you employ to enhance intercultural competence in your EFL classes?
<b>Feedback from Students:</b>	Have you received any feedback from students regarding the incorporation of intercultural competence in your teaching? If so, what has been their response?
<b>Training and Professional Development:</b>	How do you perceive the importance of training and professional development in enhancing teachers' ability to incorporate intercultural competence in EFL education?
<b>Recommendations:</b>	What recommendations do you have for educators who aim to integrate intercultural competence into their EFL teaching practices?

Demographic table

Teacher ID	Gender	Years of experience	Current Teaching Level
T1	Female	11 Years	Postgraduate
T2	Male	3 Years	Undergraduate
T3	Female	2 Years	High school teacher
T4	Male	4 Years	Undergraduate
T5	Female	5 Years	Undergraduate
T6	Male	7 Years	High school teacher
T7	Female	4 Years	Undergraduate
T8	Male	15 Years	Postgraduate
T9	Male	5 Years	Undergraduate
T10	Male	3 Years	Undergraduate