
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Culture Teaching and Learning in Cultural Courses: Motivations and Challenges Among Moroccan University Undergraduate Students

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| ABSTRACT

The integration of culture is increasingly influencing teaching and learning in Moroccan higher education. This study examines the motivations behind the incorporation of cultural courses and the challenges associated with their implementation in Moroccan higher education. Drawing on data collected from students and teachers, it investigates how the incorporation of cultural courses is perceived by both groups, as well as the difficulties that hinder their effective implementation. A mixed-methods design was adopted. Quantitative data were gathered from a survey of 132 Moroccan university students and 12 teachers, while qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 14 students. The findings revealed that fostering understanding of one's own language and other languages and freeing oneself of stereotypes and prejudices to accept others with their differences and complexities were the main motivations chosen by a majority of the respondents. Concerning the challenges, the study yielded that the promotion of cultural teaching and learning in cultural courses is unlikely to occur without overcoming the potential challenges, including time constraints, limited teaching materials, and limited background knowledge. The study concludes that understanding these motivational factors and overcoming the challenges can provide valuable insights into culture teaching and learning within cultural courses.

| KEYWORDS

Culture teaching, culture learning, motivations, challenges, higher education

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

In the context of teaching English as a foreign language, culture has been considered an essential facet (Choudhury, 2013). Researchers have emphasised that cultural instruction can enhance learners' motivation, deepen their understanding of texts, and promote intercultural communicative competence. Choudhury (2013) emphasised that culture teaching should aim to develop the ability to communicate effectively across cultures, rather than simply teaching them. As a result, many university programs have integrated cultural courses that address topics such as traditions, arts, history, and other issues. The aim of these courses is not only to transmit cultural knowledge but also to foster analytical and reflective skills among students. The cultural content in intercultural teaching and learning is not merely about knowledge transmission and memorisation; it's rather about comparing cultures, analysing, and reflecting on how culture affects people's lives (Byram et al., 2002; Crichton and Scarino, 2007, as cited in Liu, 2022).

Despite the growing importance of culture in the teaching and learning processes, there is a limited understanding of how the incorporation of cultural courses in higher education is shaped by motivational factors and potential challenges. In Morocco, university teachers and students are required to study cultural content that fosters not only linguistic knowledge but also

intercultural competence. Yet, culture teaching and learning in higher education remain challenging and limited. While previous studies have examined teachers' and students' perceptions and practices of culture teaching and learning in cultural courses, fewer have focused on the motivations and challenges for the incorporation of cultural courses in Moroccan universities. This highlights a gap in empirical knowledge on the motivational factors underlying the incorporation of cultural courses and the challenges associated with their implementation.

The present study seeks to address this gap by investigating motivations and challenges behind the incorporation of cultural courses within Moroccan higher education. Specifically, the study explores the perspectives of both undergraduate students and university teachers to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that facilitate or hinder the incorporation of cultural courses.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the motivations behind the incorporation of cultural courses in Moroccan higher education?
2. What challenges do students and teachers face in cultural courses in Moroccan higher education?

By focusing on Moroccan higher education, this research aims to provide insights into the motivations behind the incorporation of cultural courses and challenges associated with implementing them. Ultimately, the study's findings will shed light on how students and teachers experience cultural courses and the factors that support the incorporation of cultural courses and the challenges that may hinder them.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Culture in Language Education

Culture is conceptualised in language education as encompassing elements such as customs and traditions, and other aspects, including beliefs, values, and different ways of thinking. According to Tylor (1871), "culture... includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (p. 4). Scholars highlight that language and culture are inseparable, as language and culture are interrelated and mutually affect each other. Culture and language are part of each other and cannot be separated unless one of the two loses its significance (Brown, 2000). Language does not only serve as a means of communication; it becomes rather a medium of expressing a certain culture. Thus, one cannot understand a language without having some knowledge of its culture and vice versa. Whorf (1940) goes further to state that the structure of one's language shapes how they organise, conceptualise and interpret their experiences. Our thoughts are determined by language, and the different opinions may be attributed to the differences between languages. Put simply, language plays a very important role in helping people to form different worldviews.

More recent research has further emphasised the pedagogical importance of integrating culture, particularly in EFL and higher education environments. In EFL contexts, cultural contexts help students interpret text more effectively and understand how language works within specific cultural contexts. Students are required to understand the beliefs, attitudes and shared expectations of communities where the language is spoken (Smith, 2013). As a result, in higher education, cultural courses help develop not only cultural knowledge but also reflective, analytical and interpretive skills. Culture-based instruction can also provide students with better opportunities to develop intercultural awareness along with improving their language skills. For this reason, teachers help students discover various cultural issues and engage in multiple intercultural contexts. Particularly, those who view cultural education as developing both language and intercultural skills offer students opportunities to engage with cultural issues and participate in diverse intercultural environments (Hicham et al., 2025). In this regard, culture can be viewed not simply as knowledge transmission, but as a resource through which students may develop their language skills, be open to cultural differences and become able to communicate effectively across cultures.

2.2. Motivations for Learning and Teaching Culture

Generally, students are motivated to learn about culture for several reasons, such as personal interest and curiosity about other societies. Cultural courses are often motivating for learning other languages and can provide students with opportunities to explore real-life issues. For Bouqetyb and Elkarfa (2024), teachers view the cultural course as both very important and motivating for learning the target language. Furthermore, students perceive cultural knowledge as useful to understand reading materials, complete writing assignments, and participate in discussions, particularly with learners from other cultures.

Teachers may view cultural instruction as important for helping students contextualise language use, develop critical awareness, and appreciate their identity. The findings on students' perceptions of culture reveal that teachers strongly believe that teaching culture is equally essential as teaching the language itself and that culture improves students' appreciation of their cultural identity (Ziad, 2025). There are also other motivating factors, including curriculum requirements and the belief that cultural courses improve students' overall academic performance. The fact that cultural content encourages classroom interaction and addresses contemporary issues may be motivating for teachers.

2.3. Challenges in Cultural Courses

Despite their benefits, cultural courses appear to present multiple challenges for students. Research suggests that students struggle with limited cultural concepts and abstract topics. Ho (2011) explains that a fourth-year group agreed that engagement

in culture learning is difficult due to the limited cultural topics in language courses and the limited number of abstract concepts. Linguistic limitations can also constitute another challenge in cultural courses. Insufficient language proficiency may limit comprehension of cultural content. For beginners, teaching the cultural element may be unnecessary when students have a limited understanding of the nature of vocabulary, which may influence the learning process (Nguyen & Ho, 2024). Culture is often conveyed through connotations, metaphors, and idiomatic expressions, whose understanding and interpretation require linguistic competence. In addition, learners may face difficulties relating foreign cultural contexts to their own experiences, which may affect understanding and engagement in multiple cultures.

Teachers also face several challenges when teaching culture, such as a lack of adequate materials, insufficient instructional time, and the difficulty in introducing cultural content that is appropriate for the students. As an example, Sercu (2005) states that teachers from all participating countries report a lack of suitable materials to support culture teaching. Teachers may also encounter challenges related to students' low proficiency level and limited prior knowledge related to cultural content. Moreover, assessing students' learning and performance in cultural courses may be challenging because cultural understanding is complex and often difficult to measure.

The reviewed literature highlights the essential role of culture and shows the importance of cultural courses in higher education. Previous studies have investigated perceptions and practices of culture teaching and learning. Yet, fewer studies have examined motivations and challenges from both students' and teachers' perspectives, particularly in Moroccan higher education.

2.4. Research Gap

Overall, although a considerable body of research has explored teachers' and students' perceptions and practices of cultural courses, several gaps persist that warrant further investigation. It is highlighted by numerous studies that students and teachers may recognise the importance and value of cultural courses despite the potential challenges; yet, few studies have examined this issue. As a result, the way in which students perceive the incorporation of cultural courses as being motivated by several motivations is still not sufficiently understood. These motivations were given limited attention, particularly in relation to the potential challenges teachers and students face in cultural courses, such as time constraints, limited teaching materials, and limited prior knowledge. This indicates that the complexity of exploring the motivational factors and the potential challenges encountered simultaneously may not have been fully examined. In addition to what has been mentioned earlier, the current literature has rarely considered how the motivations are associated with the challenges in cultural courses. When considered together, these gaps in the literature highlight the need for further investigation, especially in underexplored contexts, such as the Moroccan educational environment. As a result, the present study aims to address the gaps by investigating the motivational factors behind the incorporation of cultural courses and the potential challenges associated with them within the Moroccan higher education environment.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

This study adopted a "mixed-methods" research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative approach will help gain a comprehensive understanding of students' and teachers' motivations for the incorporation of cultural courses as well as the challenges associated with their implementation. On the other hand, the qualitative approach has been useful in eliciting more explanation about students' motivational factors as well as the potential challenges. The design integrated a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' views.

3.2 Participants

Participants included 130 undergraduate students from two public universities (Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah and Sultan Moulay Slimane). In addition, 12 professors were purposively selected to complete the questionnaire based on their experience teaching cultural courses. Concerning the sampling technique, random sampling is the technique used for selecting the target sample for this study. This technique of sampling allows every member of the research group to participate in the study.

3.3. Instruments and Data Collection

Data were gathered through two instruments:

- A questionnaire was administered to teachers and students to obtain information about motivational factors and perceived challenges associated with cultural courses.
- A semi-structured interview aimed at gaining more detailed data. This qualitative procedure allows respondents the time and scope to talk about their opinions, and it allows the researcher to elicit in-depth information around the topic.

3.4. Data Collection Procedures

This study has been carried out at two public universities. Access to them proved not to be too difficult. Yet, access to teachers proved to be a difficult task, especially since some teachers refused to fill out the questionnaire, claiming that it is long and

includes open- ended questions. Overall, the researcher tried to contact some teachers who agreed to help by filling out the questionnaire. The process of administering the questionnaire for the students also proved to be difficult, given the refusal of some students. The process of administering has taken about 20 days. After collecting questionnaire responses from 130 students and 12 teachers, semi-structured interviews were scheduled with 14 students, each lasting 30-40 minutes. They were recorded with students' consent, and later transcribed for analysis.

3.5. Data Analysis

The instruments were administered after obtaining participants' consent. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study. The questionnaire was distributed first, followed by a semi-structured interview with teachers. All responses were recorded, transcribed, and analysed thematically, identifying recurrent themes related to the motivational factors and potential challenges within cultural courses.

4. Results

The analysis of the questionnaire and interview data revealed a range of motivational factors and challenges associated with cultural courses among university students and professors.

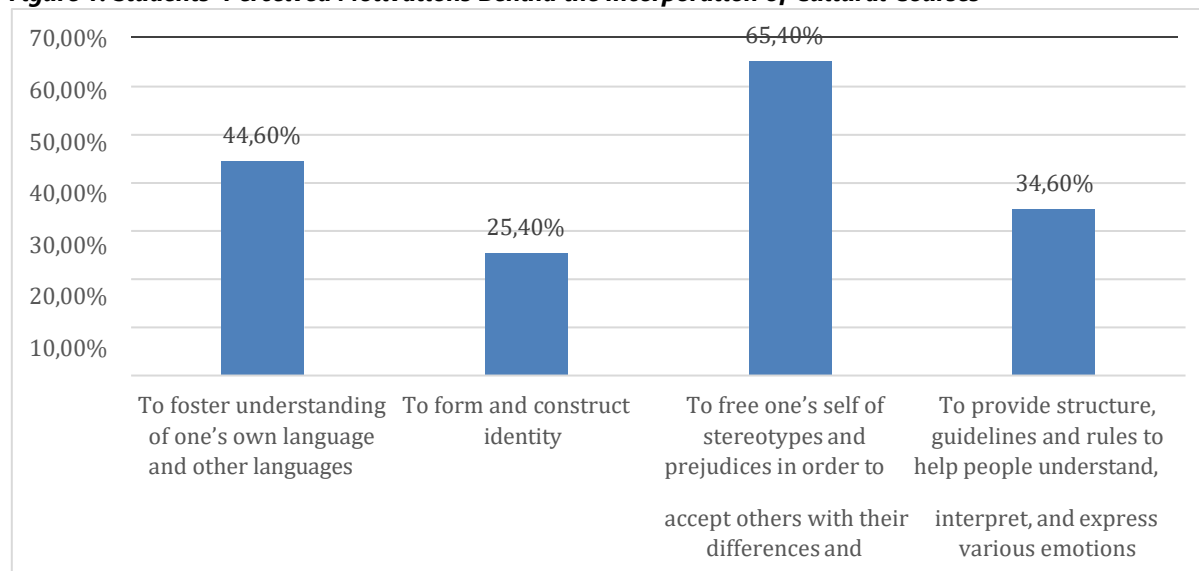
4.1 Students' Perspectives on Cultural Courses

The current section deals with presenting and analysing the results regarding the motivations behind the incorporation of cultural courses in the university academic program, and the challenges within cultural courses.

4.1.1. Students' Perceptions of the Motivations Behind Incorporating Cultural Courses

The graph below displays the results of the respondents' answers to the motivations behind the incorporation of cultural courses at the university academic program.

Figure 1: Students' Perceived Motivations Behind the Incorporation of Cultural Courses



As Figure 1 shows, a majority (65.4%) selected "to free oneself of stereotypes and prejudices to accept others with their differences and complexities" as the main motivational factor behind the incorporation of cultural courses at the university academic program. This means that the majority of cultural courses focus on eliminating the stereotypes and prejudices that students normally have towards others. For example, respondents (9) pointed out that, *"Culture courses made me learn about other people's ways of life and thinking, also new concepts and theories, and freeing one's self of stereotypes and prejudices is given much importance even if it is crucial to do so to have a good result both in the culture course and outside too that's why it should be an essential part in the culture course from the beginning of the university curriculum."* Similarly, respondent (7) argued that, *"I can understand that even if teachers do not say they want us to get rid of the stereotypes and prejudices that we have towards others for the aim of accepting different people, they do it in an indirect way. We are more concerned about concepts, theories, lifestyles"*. Fostering understanding of one's own language and other languages is the second chosen motivational factor (44.6%) behind the incorporation of cultural courses in the university academic program. Students believe that, to study a cultural course, understanding their own language and other languages becomes essential. A case in point is respondent (2) who stated that:

"When teaching or learning a language, it is a must to teach and learn cultural courses for the understanding of both the first and the target language since language is a part of culture". In the same vein, respondent (3) clearly reported that: "It is important to have a better understanding of certain cultural aspects and how people perceive their own culture and other cultures and, therefore, gain respect and cohesion". Other motivational factors include providing structure, guidelines and rules to help people understand, interpret, and express emotions (34.60%) and forming and constructing identity (25.40%).

4.1.2. Challenges Encountered by Students in Cultural Courses

To identify the main challenges associated with cultural courses, students were asked an open-ended question to describe the difficulties they faced in learning about culture.

Theme	Main issues reported	Student response
Conceptual and theoretical complexity	Abstract concepts, multiple definitions of culture	"The term culture is so complicated, and it has many definitions more than I expected"
Linguistic difficulties	Complex vocabulary, idiomatic expressions	"Complex vocabulary terms"
Limited prior knowledge	Unfamiliar traditions, habits and cultural practices	"Not having prior knowledge"
Cultural differences and culture shock	Differences between cultures, culture shock	"The huge differences between my culture and the new cultures"
Time workload	Large amount of content, limited time	"The lack of time devoted to cultural courses"
Pedagogical/ practical limitations	Lack of examples, limited practical application	"The way they are taught is challenging and boring to a far extent"

Table 1: Main Challenges Reported by Students

The responses indicate that students encountered a range of difficulties in learning about culture. The most prominent difficulties concerned the conceptual and theoretical complexity of culture, as students often struggled with abstract concepts, multiple definitions, and theoretical perspectives. A case in point is respondent (5), who stated that *"The challenges that I have met in cultural courses are related to the concepts associated with culture. There were some difficult concepts which were hard to understand"*. In the same vein, respondent (2) reported that *"The challenge I met in cultural courses is grasping all the concepts and issues that were covered in the courses. The concepts and issues were very difficult to understand"*. Similarly, respondent (8) reported more or less the same idea: *"The concepts were very difficult to understand. Sometimes you can't understand one concept or situation without experiencing it"*. This reflects that students' challenges concerning the difficulty of concepts might be reduced through reading and, therefore, becoming familiar with cultural concepts. Linguistic difficulties also emerged, particularly in relation to complex vocabulary and idiomatic expressions. In addition, several students reported having limited prior knowledge of unfamiliar cultural traditions, practices, and ways of life, which sometimes made the content difficult to understand. Cultural differences and culture shock further complicated the learning process, particularly when students encountered practices and beliefs that differed substantially from those of their own culture. Students also highlighted time and workload constraints, referring to the large amount of content. Finally, some responses pointed to pedagogical and practical limitations, including a lack of concrete examples and opportunities to apply cultural knowledge in practice. Overall, these findings suggest that students' difficulties were not limited to linguistic barriers but also involved conceptual, experiential, cultural, and pedagogical implications.

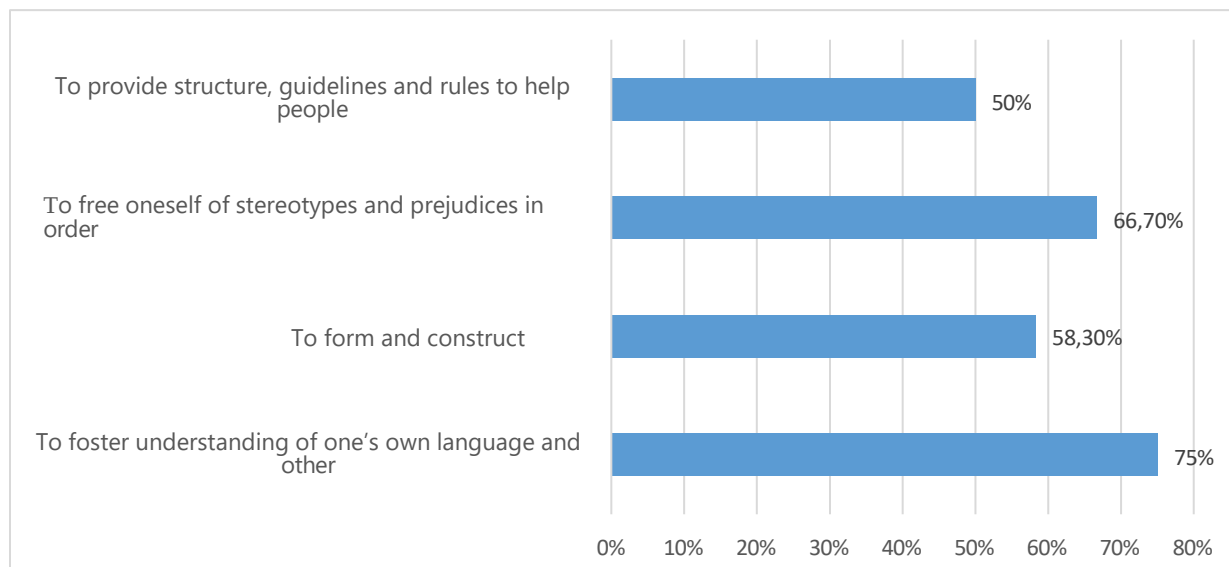
4.2. Teachers' Perspectives on Cultural Courses

Teachers' perspectives were also examined to explore their views on the motivations behind the incorporation of cultural courses, as well as the challenges within these courses.

4.2.1. Teachers' Perceptions of the Motivations Behind Incorporating Cultural Courses

The data in the graph below indicate the teachers' perspectives regarding the motivations behind the incorporation of cultural courses.

Figure 2: Teachers' Perceived Motivations for the Incorporation of Cultural Courses



As Figure 2 illustrates, a large number of teachers opted for almost all the given choices. Yet, there are slight differences in terms of the percentages. For instance, the most frequently selected reason by the majority of the respondents was "to foster understanding of one's own language and other languages" (75%), followed by "to free oneself of stereotypes and prejudices to accept other with their differences and complexities" (66.70%), "to form and construct identity" (58.30), and "to provide structure, guidelines and rules to help people understand, interpret, and express various emotions" (50%). This suggests that, according to teachers, the main focus should be placed on understanding one's own language and other languages since culture and language are inseparable; culture is embedded in language.

4.2.2. Challenges Encountered by Teachers in Teaching Culture

While the motivations were analysed quantitatively using frequency-based measures, challenges were reported descriptively due to the exploratory nature of the data.

Theme	Main issues reported	Student Response
Resource and access constraints	Difficulty providing/ assessing cultural documents, photocopying long articles, limited technical facilities and students' financial constraints	"Sometimes, technical facilities, poverty, and students cannot have access to the document"
Complexity and breath of culture	Difficulty covering the multiple dimensions of culture and dealing with its complexity	"The complexity of culture makes it hard to teach all its aspects"
Bridging theory and practice	Difficulty moving from abstract theoretical concepts to concrete practice and application	"The main challenge has been how to avoid the emptiness of theory without practice and the blindness of practice without theory"
Managing cultural differences	Difficulty helping students understand and accept differences between cultures	"Accepting the differences between cultures"
No significant challenges reported	Some students perceived teaching cultural courses as enjoyable and reported no particular challenges	"No challenges, it's a pleasure to teach cultural courses."

Table 2: Main Challenges Reported by Teachers

As shown in Table 2, teachers identified several challenges associated with teaching cultural courses, with the most prominent challenge relating to students' limited access to and resources for the cultural documents and the complexity of culture. Other difficulties involved the difficulty of concretising the abstract and managing cultural differences. However, some students reported that teachers faced no particular difficulties and described teaching cultural courses as enjoyable. Overall, the responses suggest that teachers' challenges are primarily associated with resource constraints, the theory-practice gap, and the complexity of cultural content.

5. Discussion

The objective of the current paper has been to investigate teachers' and students' motivational factors underlying the incorporation of cultural courses as well as the potential challenges associated with their implementation. There are two research questions that were answered by using different data collection instruments.

Students primarily perceive cultural courses as a means of overcoming stereotypes and developing greater acceptance of people's differences and complexities. This highlights the crucial role of cultural courses in fostering openness towards others. This finding is consistent with what was reported by Fleet (2006), who emphasised that culture teaching enhances cultural awareness, appreciation, and acceptance of cultural diversity. The second motivational factor was fostering a better understanding of both one's language and other languages, which suggests that students consider the strong relationship between language and culture. Other perceived motivations include guiding understanding, interpreting, and expressing various emotions and identity construction. However, unlike Kramsch (1993), who found that, according to traditional thought, the teaching of culture has been limited to knowledge transmission about people of the target country and their general attitudes (as cited in Oreen, 1995), the findings of the study indicate that students view cultural courses as extending beyond knowledge transmission to social and personal development. Furthermore, the achievement of these objectives may be hindered by the challenges reported by students, particularly difficulties with abstract themes, multiple definitions of culture, and limited prior knowledge. As Nguyen & Ho (2024) found, teaching culture, according to some teachers, is challenging, particularly when students' prior cultural knowledge is limited. In fact, while students recognise the importance of cultural courses, they also report several challenges.

Additionally, teachers reveal agreement regarding the motivations behind the incorporation of cultural courses. Although fostering an understanding of one's own language and other languages received the highest proportion of responses, followed by overcoming stereotypes and prejudices, constructing identity, and providing guidelines for understanding, interpreting and expressing oneself, the differences were somewhat small. This suggests that teachers view cultural courses as reflecting multiple motivations for incorporating cultural courses rather than a single motivation. Such a view is consistent with Chau & Truong's (2019) perspective that teachers showed strong agreement regarding the purposes of integrating cultural teaching in language teaching. Despite the value of cultural courses, teachers also reported several challenges, particularly a lack of appropriate materials, time constraints, and concretising the abstract. This supports Yang & Chen (2016), who argued that "we found many difficulties in teaching culture for instructors, such as the lack of knowledge by instructors of the of the National Standards (2006), the lack of time for preparing classes with cultural elements embedded in them, the lack of appropriate materials, the absence of technological support, and students' misunderstanding or stereotypes of the target culture (p.1133).

These results indicate that while teachers may emphasise and value the motivations behind the incorporation of cultural courses, they continue to face practical difficulties that can hinder the effective implementation of those motivations.

6. Conclusion

This study explored the motivational factors and challenges associated with cultural courses among Moroccan university teachers and undergraduate students. Based on the data from students and teachers, the overall results reveal that both groups recognise the importance and value of cultural courses. Students perceive the incorporation of cultural courses as being motivated by several motivations, such as overcoming stereotypes and developing acceptance of others, understanding one's own language and other languages, guiding how students understand, interpret, and express themselves, and contributing to identity construction. Similar to students, teachers showed broad agreement regarding the motivations behind the incorporation of cultural courses. At the same time, both students and teachers faced challenges related to insufficient instructional time, limited background knowledge, engagement with unfamiliar or abstract concepts, and a lack of adequate materials. Overall, the study contributes to research on culture teaching and learning in Moroccan higher education by highlighting the need to address the motivational factors and the potential challenges in cultural courses. Future research may build on these results by investigating instructional strategies that improve the incorporation of cultural courses and possible strategies for overcoming the potential challenges.

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