

Enhancing Interculturality in EFL University Education: Examining Pedagogical Practices and Learner Engagement

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Abstract

Intercultural Communicative Competence has become indispensable for university students in today's increasingly globalized world. Beyond mere language proficiency, ICC encompasses the ability to communicate and collaborate effectively across cultural boundaries. This study is an empirical attempt to assess Moroccan EFL university students' ICC and to systematically investigate the factors that facilitate and constrain its development.

The study employs a quantitative approach combined with a cross-sectional design, using surveys as a primary data collection tool. The sample comprises students and teachers from five Moroccan universities, with varying participation rates across groups. Specifically, 372 BA (S6) and MA students completed 353 students responded to the SVICCFS and 63 university professors completed the TPICCCFS.

The results indicated that various factors intervene to enhance ICC skills, such as language proficiency, exchange programs, cultural knowledge, the teacher's professional character and roles, and pedagogical methodologies. However, factors such as teacher preparedness is viewed as a limiting constraint according to teachers and students. The study summarizes a number of implications for students, educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers. It also proposes valuable recommendations to strengthen ICC among Moroccan EFL university students and to help them thrive in the national and global job market.

Keywords: Intercultural communicative competence, Higher education, Moroccan teachers and students, EFL classrooms, Comparative analysis.

1. Introduction

'Fluent fools' was a concept coined by Bennett (1993) to describe language users who are fluent in English but do not have intercultural competence. This sheds light on shortcoming of favouring communicative competence as a language learning end because it often overlooks the cultural aspect, and thus intercultural sensitivity. Hence, Lado (1957) who likened them to "two faces of the same coin" believes that culture is inevitable in language learning. Nevertheless, as cited in (Elhiyani, 2020), there is no general consensus on a single definition of the concept intercultural communicative competence (ICC) because it is viewed from various perspectives across disciplines, including healthcare (Anand and Lahiri, 2009), religious organizations (Yancey, 2009), and foreign language education (Byram, 1997; Bennett and Deardorff, 2009).

An understanding of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is beginning to take shape. Whilst it is obviously more closely associated with foreign language learning compared to larger terms like intercultural competence, ICC is rooted in interdisciplinary perspectives. Nevertheless, it is a challenging task to define ICC due to its slippery nature and far-reaching use across different walks of study. Thus, defining the concept has to go in accordance with the precise aspirations of the study.

Building on this foundation, it is essential to recognize that intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is not merely an adjunct to language learning but a central component of effective communication in multilingual and multicultural contexts. ICC involves a complex interplay of attitudes, knowledge, skills, and awareness that enable individuals to interpret, relate, and interact appropriately and effectively across cultural boundaries. Scholars such as Byram (1997) emphasize the need for language learners to develop critical cultural awareness

and the ability to reflect on their own and others' cultural frameworks. Therefore, promoting ICC goes beyond linguistic mastery to include fostering empathy, tolerance, and global citizenship.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Intercultural Competence vs. Intercultural Communicative Competence: Conceptual Distinctions

As marked in the work of Hammer, Gudykunst, & Wiseman (1978) and Ruben (1976), as cited in Spitzberg & Changnon (2009, p. 9), the Intercultural Competence (IC) as a new construct was totally different from the term of intercultural communication that emerged in the 1970s. This can be seen in the huge wave not only witnessed in general education but also in language instruction as education shifted to competence-based approach (Byram, 2008). In their attempt to illustrate the term, Hammer and Bennet (1998) made a distinction between intercultural sensitivity and intercultural competence. The two scholars conceptualized the former as "the ability to discriminate and experience relevant cultural differences," while they defined the latter as "the ability to think and act in interculturally appropriate ways". Thanks to their distinction between the two concepts, the way has been today paved for a plethora of discussions on intercultural competence. For Deardorff (2006), as an example, IC is "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes".

Many attempts have been made to crystallize the differences between intercultural competence and intercultural communicative competence as they particularly were relevant in the field of foreign language teaching. Byram (1997a), as one of the pioneers in the field, explained that while intercultural competence alludes to individuals' ability to interact in their mother tongue with people from another nation and culture, the other comprises language teaching and focuses on "the ability to interact with people from another country and culture in a foreign language".

Lantz-Deaton and Gol (2020) provided another viewpoint on the interrelated relation between intercultural communicative competence and intercultural competence. The two scholars argued that intercultural communicative competence entails interaction among individuals; whereas intercultural competence is a large umbrella that includes intercultural communicative competence as one of its pillars. They, therefore, viewed intercultural communicative competence as a narrow specific concept, for it basically emphasizes communication among speakers whose mother tongues are diverse.

The relationship between the terms ICC and IC exists in a plethora of manners in literature about linguistics. IC for some scholars is seen as the ability to effectively and appropriately communicate in intercultural contexts (Akdere et al., 2021; Deardorff, 2020). IC, in this case, is roughly about communication. The intercultural competence or intercultural communicative competence typically include the attitudes, skills and knowledge required in appropriate communications when interacting across different contexts (Deardorff, 2020, p. 5). Lantz-Deaton and Golubeva (2020), on the other hand, suggested that the development of IC occurs through communication facilitated by ICC. Thus, from this perspective, ICC works as the means to instill IC. As Deardorff (2020) highlighted, irrespective of the specific conceptual trend embraced, IC development undoubtedly seeks communication skills enhancement.

Byram (1997) suggested a model which viewed ICC with regard to five "saviors", or knowledges; all are foreign language education based. These "saviors" could then be cultivated in an individual's communicative competence in a foreign language. Learners in the twenty-first century, according to Byram, are to be urged to instill a range of attitudes, skills, and knowledge to surf easily and smoothly in the midst of the vast array of

(inter)cultural barriers. Here, this novel viewpoint introduces a clear-cut line from the old path of cultural learning, that usually emphasizes rote information like traditions, food, and music. In that, it overlooks learners' needs to interpret and negotiate various inputs. Meier (2014), in the same connection, stressed the importance of negotiation techniques to ICC. He, then, argued that the quality of these skills depends on three interrelated dimensions: noticing, communication strategies, and flexibility.

2.2 The Importance of ICC in EFL Higher Education Contexts

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) is a dynamic process, as suggested by Young and Sercombe (2010), through which speakers put into practice cultures resources and practices they are familiar with, as well as those they may not traditionally be associated with, in their interactions with others. The process brings out cultural fluidity engagement wherein speakers use components from distinct cultures in their exchanges. Individuals navigate and integrate various cultural influences in the realm of this intricate network of social interactions, and so they enhance a rich tapestry of mutual understanding and experiences. The present approach enhances the versatility of exchanges among different cultures. This enables individuals to easily and smoothly link components among diverse cultural settings, which fosters establishing an interrelated and homogeneous international community.

ICC is best comprehended as a 'learned perceptual adaptation', thereby individuals' capacity to adapt and alternate their behaviors while interacting across varied cultures or within different cultural situations grows, as Bennett (1993) argues. This urges speakers to penetrate cultural diversity with flexibility, curiosity, and a commitment to evergreen evolution as this perspective underscores the vivid, developing, and intercultural competence situational nature. Nurturing intercultural competence presents itself not only as a personal asset but also as a fundamental pillar in enhancing harmony, collaboration, and mutual understanding on a global scale in such rapidly growing and ongoing globalized interconnectedness.

From a different perspective, Fantini (2000, 2001, 2003, Revised 2009) defined intercultural communicative competence as a complex requisite comprising a range of skills to engage meaningfully and effectively with speakers whose languages and cultures are distinct. The term "effective" entails a person's perception of performance in the second language and culture (LC2), which reflects to a stranger's perspective of the target culture. In contrast, "appropriate" is the way a speaker's acts are looked at by the people of the target culture, which represents an insider's opinion.

Fantini (2021) further stresses the prerequisite nature of suggesting a theoretical framework as a pivotal preliminary stage, which is specifically meant for assessment aims before embarking on ICC studies. He, therefore, shed some light on a number of ICC elements:

- A variety of traits and characteristics.
- Three core domains: the ability to establish and maintain relationships, effective communication with minimal distortion, and collaboration to achieve mutual goals.
- Four dimensions: knowledge, attitudes/affect, skills, and awareness.
- Proficiency in the host language.
- Varying levels of attainment throughout a longitudinal and developmental process.

Therefore, in EFL higher education, Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) is increasingly recognized as a core educational objective, as it enables learners not only to use a foreign language effectively but also to communicate appropriately across diverse cultural contexts. According to Byram (1997), ICC empowers individuals to become "intercultural speakers" who can interpret and relate across cultural boundaries, thus going beyond the functional use of language. In globalized academic and professional environments, this competence is essential for fostering mutual understanding, reducing stereotypes, and

promoting collaboration.(Fantini, 2021) similarly emphasizes that developing ICC enhances learners' adaptability, empathy, and open-mindedness traits that are crucial in both academic settings and multicultural workplaces. In higher education, these qualities contribute to the formation of more globally competent graduates who are capable of participating in international dialogue and contributing meaningfully to cross-cultural interactions. The development of ICC in university contexts offers a wide range of benefits, both at the individual and societal levels. Deardorff (2006) emphasizes that ICC involves not only external behaviors but also internal processes such as perspective-taking, tolerance, and respect, which contribute to students' personal growth and intercultural maturity. These traits enhance learners' ability to navigate ambiguity, manage cultural misunderstandings, and build meaningful relationships across differences. Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) further illustrates that individuals progress from ethnocentric views to more ethnorelative perspectives, a transformation that supports democratic engagement, inclusive thinking, and social cohesion. In EFL education, developing ICC also strengthens learners' academic communication, critical thinking, and participation in culturally diverse classrooms. Ultimately, integrating ICC into language education prepares students not only to speak another language but to act as responsible global citizens equipped to engage with the complexities of an interconnected world.

2.3 Students-Related Factors

In intercultural communicative competence (ICC) environments, focus does not depend on the quantity of knowledge transferred; instead, it lies on the attitudes, skills, and critical consciousness which students develop. This entails a move towards an approach wherein students are the center of the teaching learning process. Byram (1997a, pp. 64–73) made a distinction between three diverse environments for ICC acquisition: the classroom, fieldwork, and independent learning. Each of these is featured with different levels of teacher-student interaction. Instructors involvement in the classroom is naturally higher, though it may differ. They, on another hand, take a supervisory hat, when it comes to fieldwork. With regards to autonomous learning, learners are responsible for their own learning while the teacher potentially acts as a tutor or a guide. Moreover, many learners-based factors are deemed fundamental in determining the success of ICC development. Some of the highly important and relevant factors include:

1. **Language Proficiency:** It refers the students' fluency, vocabulary, and grammatical accuracy in a language. It represents the basis for adequate intercultural communication.
2. **Cultural Knowledge:** It entails students' awareness of their culture and the target one(s), encompassing customs, values, and beliefs.
3. **Cultural Immersion and Experiences:** It is related to factors like one's own experiences with different cultures, travel opportunities, and exposure to foreign media. These elements contribute to broadening their understanding of different perceptions.
4. **Exchange Programs:** This has to do with participation in exchange opportunities outside one's homeland which provides live engagement with people from different cultures, enhancing students' understanding and appreciation.
5. **Cross-Cultural Communication Training:** It represents formal training in cross-cultural communication skills that allow learners to surf cultural differences appropriately.

2.4 Teachers-Related Factors

The role of the teacher, in intercultural communicative competence (ICC) contexts, entails being a mediator as they give priority to the development of novel attitudes, skills, and critical awareness instead of having students acquire knowledge merely. Therefore, according to Byram, the teachers' tasks exceed providing comprehensive information or putting other communities under observation in the classroom; rather, they should target enhancing

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students' competence to critically reflect on their own cultural values, beliefs, and behaviors, and to autonomously navigate and comprehend cultural disparities (Byram et al., 2001, p. 3). Non-native teachers, in this framework, are specifically favored for possessing the capacity to explore between the source and target cultures, but native curious and open-minded ones, particularly those with extensive travel experiences, might become equally or even more valued. That said, being effective does not depend on being natives or non-natives; instead, the teachers who can guide students to observe common areas between their own culture and other cultures as nurture curiosity concerning richness in otherness are favored.

The teacher as one of the pillars of the teaching-learning process stands undoubtedly highly essential just like set learning tasks and assessments are fundamental for a fruitful learning context. Coffey (2015) proposed the concept of "sharing the power", which is foundational in establishing cultural community in foreign language (FL) learning curricula. Building it, cultural community, involves a promotion of meaningful and effective communication among group members irrespective of differences. By this, it is meant that students need to be empowered to respect tolerance of ambiguity, instill empathy and cooperation, and cultivate cultural values understanding, which all target alignment with those of ICC.

There is a plethora of other factors, besides the aforementioned thoughts, which have to do with the type of teachers' contribution regarding the trajectory of fostering students' ICC. The following are a few instances:

1. **Teaching Methodologies and Practices:** They refer to the methods teachers put into practice for successful instruction delivery. They include integrating activities and tasks which take students' cultural sensitivity and collaboration to the next level.
2. **The Teacher's Professional Character:** It entails a teacher's personal capacities, attitudes, and intercultural consciousness, which help in establishing an anxiety free learning environment that leaves no one behind.
3. **The Teacher's Roles:** They clearly, as the name suggests, mean the teacher's several roles, which transcend being mere language instructors to becoming facilitators, guides, mentors and moderators of intercultural understanding and critical thinking.
4. **The Teacher's Preparedness and Training:** This revolves around teachers' repertoire and skills in intercultural communication, especially if they have undergone specific training for promoting ICC development into their teaching methods.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Objectives

1. To explore the teachers and students' perceptions on the supportive factors impacting the development of ICC at tertiary education.
2. To identify the various constraints that hinder the enhancement of ICC at EFL higher education as perceived by instructors and students.
3. To suggest different pedagogical implications to foster interculturality among Moroccan EFL university students.

3.2 Research Questions

1. What are the Moroccan university instructors and students' attitudes towards ICC supportive factors?
2. How do Moroccan students perceive of the hinderances of ICC progression in EFL classrooms?
3. What pedagogical implications can be proposed to enhance intercultural skills of Moroccan EFL university students?

3.3 Research Design

The present study aims to explore the supportive factors and limiting constraints that impact ICC development within Moroccan university EFL classrooms. both university instructors

and students’ perspectives across five Moroccan universities are included. ¹ This is a challenging and complex task. Therefore, a strategic and effective approach to data collection is mandatory taking into consideration the multifaceted nature of the populations that participate in the study and the need to capture a comprehensive snapshot of their skills and viewpoints. In this regard, a cross-sectional design is suggested as the most suitable way to collect data. This design permits researchers to collect data from a wide range of participants at a single point in time and offers a snapshot of the issue being investigated. The sample in a cross-sectional design is selected based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria set for the study.

Cross-sectional design is widely adopted in educational research projects which emphasizes its relevance to the objectives of this study. As Dornyei (2007) observed, cross-sectional studies have become the cornerstone of contemporary applied linguistic research, reflecting a broader trend within educational research. The choice of this methodological approach smoothly aligns with our objectives and allows for a better investigation of the views and development trajectories of ICC among Moroccan EFL university students. To conduct this study with a large number of students and teachers from five sites is very challenging if not impossible using a longitudinal design.

3.4 Site and Participants

In the present study, five Moroccan universities are identified and selected as they offer a fertile and diverse area for data collection with two primary considerations in mind. To start with, these universities including Mohamed V University in Rabat, Moulay Smail University in Meknes, Abdelmalek Essaadi University in Tetouan, Ibn Tofail University in Kenitra, and Hassan II University in Casablanca are strategically positioned across the Middle and Northern regions of Morocco and close to each other and to the city where the researcher lives. These institutions are situated in suitable urban places and benefit from strong infrastructure and robust transportation. This factor is very essential and helpful during the data collection phase. Besides, these universities offer easy access for the researcher. After reaching out to university professors through emails, phone calls, and personal connections with their acquaintances, a considerable number of them kindly facilitated access to their students in the classrooms and through various social media platforms. A good number of teachers also accepted to take part in this study by completing the inventory shared by the researcher.

Table 1: Distribution of Participants across Groups

The Total Number of Participants	
Quantitative data collection	
	❖ Students’ ICC Factors Survey: 369
	❖ Teachers’ ICC Factors Survey: 63

3.5 Data Collection Instruments

3.5.1 The Students' Views on ICC Factors Survey (SVICCFS)

The first survey, SVICCFS, initially comprises 25 items collected from an extensive literature review. The number of items was reduced to 17 after multiple revisions and discussions with some university experts. The pilot study was then conducted with 68 Bachelor's (BA) and Master's (MA) students from three Moroccan universities, particularly Abdelmalek Essadi in Tetouan, Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah in Fes, and Abi Chouaib Eddoukali in Eljadida. The 17 items were classified under 2 types of factors, including student-related, teacher-related, this survey utilised a 5-point Likert scale to assess students' views on ICC factors because of multiple advantages.

This survey was created using Google Forms and administered to the participants using email and WhatsApp. They were asked to reflect on the items/statements by picking one of the five options: Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Agree (4), and Strongly Agree (5).

As conclusion, the total reliability of the SVICCFS is good, as Cronbach's alpha score of 0.839 demonstrates. This result indicates that the items are generally consistent and that the survey is reliable and can effectively investigate the intended areas and measure the various factors it comprises.

3.5.2 The Teachers' Perspectives on ICC Factors Survey (TPICCFs)

The third pilot study was conducted to check the reliability of the Teachers' Perspectives on ICC Factors Survey (TPICCFs) with 9 university teachers from Abdelmalek Essadi University in Tetouan and Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University in Fes. Similar to the GPI and the student survey, teachers were asked to express their opinions about the statements/items by selecting one of the provided options: Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Agree (4), and Strongly Agree (5). I used Google Forms to design the survey and shared it with the respondents using emails and WhatsApp. Initially, the 17 items that were included in the student survey were summarized and put together to only 11 statements with regard to the two types of factors. Nevertheless, the 11 factors are included in the survey even if the statements were longer. Before administering the survey to the 9 participants, it underwent scrutiny by two professors from Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University in Fes and Abdelmalek Essadi University in Tetouan, who agreed to evaluate it. The researcher then made the necessary modifications with regards to content, structure, and the number of items before initiating the pilot study.

Another reliability test of the scale was run, and the score significantly increased to .766 which is satisfactory. Other changes in terms of the content and the structure of the statements were also essential. The final version of the scale of 11 items covers various ICC factors within the two categories including student-related and teacher-related.

3.6 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics is defined as a discipline that determines the essential characteristics of a database. They are generally used to organize and summarize data effectively by elucidating the relationship between variables with a sample population, which makes them fundamental research.

This study uses SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) 26 to analyze the quantitative data. The research questions were approached using descriptive statistics since the difference in opinions of the teachers and students is not a focus of the present study. However, the aim is to explore and identify the diverse factors that intervene in shaping EFL university students' ICC skills. Using descriptive statistics helped the researcher effectively explore and characterize the factors and provide valuable insights into the dynamics of ICC enhancement in the Moroccan context. The results obtained from student surveys are extensively described before comparing them with the findings from the teacher survey analysis to determine alignments and/ or discrepancies in the findings. This holistic approach permits a detailed and

scientific examination of the factors that influence ICC levels and paves the way for relevant recommendations and interventions to be suggested.

4. Findings

4.1 Supportive Factors and Constraints According to Students

Table2: Students' Views on ICC Factors

	Factors	Mean	Std. Dev
Student-related	Language Proficiency	3,5977	,81338
	Cultural Knowledge	3,9150	,86840
	Exchange Programs	3,9660	,92870
	Cross-cultural Communcation	3,8329	,98156
Teacher-Related	Cultural Immersion	3,9193	1,02933
	Professional Personae	3,9495	,62466
	Preparedness and Training	2,9263	,87838
	Teaching Methodologies	3,4816	,73408
	Teacher's Roles	3,4603	,71895

The analysis yields several supportive factors and constraints that determine the levels of ICC among Moroccan BA(S6) and MA EFL university students. As for the enablers, multiple factors lead the list with high mean scores. Exchange programs hold the highest mean score (M=3.97) and a low standard deviation of (SD= 0.81338), which indicates their positive impact. Teachers' professional character (M= 3.95, SD= 0.62466) and students' cultural immersions and experiences (M= 3.92) are close behind it. This shows the significance of the teachers' professional personae and the deep cultural engagement in developing intercultural skills. The high mean score in cultural knowledge (M= 3.92) and cross-cultural communication (M= 3.83) indicate their essential roles. It is vital to equip students with enough knowledge about different cultures and relevant intercultural opportunities to practice their communication skills since they are aware of their positive contributions. Additionally, supportive factors, including language proficiency of students (M= 3.6), teachers' teaching methodologies (M= 3.48), and teachers' roles (M= 3.46) are essential for the development of intercultural communicative competence. The scores in these factors indicate the role linguistic abilities, culturally relevant materials, innovative teaching practices, and multifaceted roles of teachers can play in developing students' competencies.

In contrast, the analysis classified one factor as constraining because it limits students' opportunities to develop competencies. The relatively low mean score in teachers' preparedness and training (M= 2.93) shows that teachers are well-prepared to provide their students with the essential requirements to enhance their ICC skills. the low SD= 0.87838 indicates that there is less variability in students' answers and supports the mean score.

4.2 Supportive Factors and Constraints According to Educators

Table 3: Teachers Perspective of ICC Factors

	Factors	Mean	Std.Dev
Student-related	Language Proficiency	3,9524	,97432
	Cultural Knowledge	4,3810	,55150
	Cultural Immersion and Experiences	4,4921	,66897
	Exchang Programs	4,5079	,69266
	Cross-Cultural	4,2540	,67126
	Communication Training		
Teacher-	Teaching Methodology	3,9683	,84182

related	Professional Personae	4,1587	,78712
	Teacher's Roles	4,4127	,52777
	Preparedness and Training	2,8968	,88518

Similar to students' answers, data collected from Moroccan EFL university educators classified the factors into 8 enablers and 1 hindrance of intercultural communicative competence development. The analysis reveals several key supportive factors, among which exchange programs rated the highest with a mean score of 4.51 and standard deviation of 0.69266. This score demonstrates that teachers strongly value the role of cultural encounters for EFL learners' benefits. With another stronger mean score ($M=4.49$) and low standard deviation of 0.66897, cultural immersion and experiences stand as the second most important supportive factor. It indicates that firsthand exposure to diverse cultures has a significant influence on enhancing ICC. Other factors, including the teacher's role ($M=4.41$), cultural knowledge ($M=4.38$), Cross-cultural communication training ($M=4.25$), and teachers' professional character ($M=4.16$) respectively, have mean scores above 4 which reveals a general consensus on their significance among teachers. The standard deviation in all those factors is below which indicates consensus among teachers on their significance. Besides, teaching methodology ($M=3.97$) and language proficiency ($M=3.95$) play a vital role and contribute to a conducive environment for ICC promotion. The above factors collectively demonstrate that Moroccan university EFL teachers argue that there are various supportive elements that learners can benefit from if the aim is enhancing their intercultural skills, regardless of some concerns with their efficiency. Finally, the low standard deviation in the factors indicates that teachers' options are spread out, which supports the results of the mean. In opposite, again 1 factor is perceived as a constraint for ICC development according to Moroccan educators. Teachers' preparedness and training has low mean scores ($M=2.90$) and a low standard deviation score ($M=0.88518$). The result indicates that urgent interventions are required to promote teachers' intercultural abilities, integrate more authentic sources, and modify the evaluation methods.

4.3 Summary of the Results from Students and Teachers' Surveys

Table4: The Results of Students and teachers' Surveys

Supportive Factors	Exchange programs
	Cultural immersion and experiences
	Cultural knowledge
	Cross-cultural communication training
	Language proficiency of students
	The teacher's roles
	Teacher's professional character
Constraints	Teaching methodologies
	The teacher's preparedness and training

The table above summarizes the results of data collected from both teachers and students regarding the factors influencing the development of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) among EFL university students. All participants highlighted the importance of student-related factors such as cultural immersion, prior intercultural experiences, cultural knowledge, cross-cultural communication training, and language

proficiency. Moreover, the role of the teacher, their professional character, and the teaching methodologies they adopt were also identified as essential elements that support ICC development. However, the survey results revealed a shared concern among both groups: university professors in Moroccan higher education institutions are not sufficiently qualified or trained to teach intercultural skills effectively. This gap in preparation may negatively impact learners' ability to develop ICC. Therefore, it is crucial to invest in teacher training programs focused on intercultural awareness, curriculum design, and effective instructional strategies to better equip educators to foster intercultural competence in their classrooms.

5. Discussion

According to the students' perspectives, the study showed that Moroccan EFL university students consider cultural knowledge as one of the most significant factors contributing to the development of cultural sensitivity and, therefore, communication across cultures. This is in agreement with (Tran & Seepho, 2017) who identifies cultural knowledge as essential to the development of students' intercultural communicative competence. Additionally, Moroccan students recognize that exposure to other cultures is vital in enhancing their social and cultural understanding as shown by the results of this study. (Deardorff, 2006) emphasised this by emphasizing the significance of cultural knowledge and understanding in developing intercultural communicative competence. Besides, the findings reveal that students identified cultural immersion experiences and participating in exchange programs as highly supportive factors. In their study, (Vromans et al., 2023) found the same results and highlighted the significant impact of cultural immersion and exchange programs on students' ICC skills. These activities are highly recommended and as they offer students direct, hands-on experiences and enable them to explore cultural differences more effectively.

Both students and teachers contend that exchange programs are notably significant because they give students opportunities for real and meaningful cross-cultural interactions. They also consider them as vital in enabling students to immerse themselves in different cultural settings. This view is additionally supported by Tran and Seepho (2017). They view exchange programs as instrumental in extending skills such as: cultural awareness, sensitivity and empathy among students. Another factor that came out clearly was participation in cultural activities that are outside one's cultural setting. Engaging in such occasions enables the students to embrace the diverse cultures and also develop proper interpersonal communication skills as confirmed by Tran & Phan (2021). These cultural events help the students understand various cultures, practices and norms in society, and hence improve their ICC.

In addition, the acquisition of cultural knowledge, which may help shape identity and fit into a particular culture, is another significant factor. Teachers and students agree that cultural factors such as values, norms, beliefs and attitudes, communication practices, and social manners are crucial for proper intercultural relations. This is in agreement with the study of Tran and Seepho (2017). Another important factor which is cross-cultural communication training is also highlighted. These types of training processes are helpful for the students so that they can learn qualities such as empathy, listening, and cross-cultural flexibility, which are essential in the current world that is increasingly becoming a global village. Language proficiency is fundamental in intercultural interactions because it helps the students convey their ideas and receive ideas from others. It helps students build up their confidence while communicating with speakers of different cultures, thus making communication easier. This finding is supported by (El Hadri, 2022) who pointed out that language competence is an important factor in effective intercultural communication. Language skills are also very critical in the development of ICC. Although they are crucial to mastering foreign languages and to communicating with people from other cultures, not all students gain the required language skills to engage in intercultural communication.

Last but not least, both groups of participants found that student-related factors are not a concern. Nevertheless, it cannot be concluded that Moroccan university students are actively and fully involved in practices of intercultural communicative competence. In fact, many students cannot overcome barriers preventing them from enrolling in exchange programs that

so important for promoting cross-cultural education. Based on the analysis of students' answers, it is possible to state that teachers are one of the most influential factors that can contribute to the enhancement of intercultural competence of students through teachers' competencies and teaching strategies. In agreement with Vromans et al., (2023), students reported that teachers' professional characteristics are helpful in improving cultural competence, which is useful in developing a healthy classroom learning environment. Teaching methodologies and practices that teachers apply in their classrooms are another supportive factor as perceived by students. This conclusion aligns with the findings of Tran and Seepho (2017) who noted that different teaching strategies are helpful in the promotion of cultural education. The paper has also noted that active and student-centered teaching methods, including group debates, simulations, and problem-based learning can improve the students' intercultural communicative competence as they offer them more room to engage in meaningful practices.

From the teachers' answers, it can be concluded that educators are cultural intermediaries who encourage, motivate, guide, inspire, and monitor students to participate in intercultural communication discourse. Effective teachers, therefore, foster cross-cultural learning processes and enable the students to deal with cultural diversity efficiently. Furthermore, professional qualities and qualifications, including motivation, dedication, and inspiration, are additional influential factors that contribute to the students' ICC development. Teachers passionate about intercultural education inspire their students to value and pursue intercultural learning. Tran and Seepho (2017) have also supported the present study as they have pointed out that dedicated teachers positively impact the development of students' intercultural communicative competence.

However, one of the challenges that is likely to be encountered is the teachers' lack of preparedness and training. Thus, the present research suggests that the teachers are somewhat culturally unsophisticated and unready to work with students in intercultural communication situations which calls for better training and support for teachers. El Hadri (2022) also noted this and emphasized that teachers should be well-prepared with resources and knowledge on how to foster the students' intercultural competencies. This is in concurrence with Tran and Phan (2021) in which the authors noted that there is the absence of efficient teacher training programs that can address such problems. The inconsistencies in teachers' cultural readiness can create irrelevant and unequal learning opportunities for students. Some can receive adequate guidance and assistance depending on the teachers' skills and capabilities, while others will be deprived from them. This paramount situation accentuates the need for equal, motivating, and ongoing professional development trainings for teachers.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Implications

Based on the findings of this study and the review of relevant literature, a number of implications and practical applications are suggested to Moroccan students, educators, and curriculum designers.

Initially, Moroccan students are required to make practical improvements taking into account their constant interactivities both online and in real life. In this context, the findings of this study can be effective and beneficial for Moroccan university EFL students in multiple ways. First, there is a need for continuous and active engagement in intercultural learning. This can be achieved by actively involving students in the processes of intercultural learning. They should seize the chance culturally-related events, including cultural festivals, cultural camps,

studying abroad programs, and exchange programs offer. Students can also socialize with young people who originate from different cultural backgrounds. These methods can be very helpful to extend their cultural knowledge, acquire the necessary language skills to communicate fluently, and enhance their abilities to interact successfully in multicultural environments.

The second significant implication is encouraging self-reflection. Moroccan students should be stimulated regularly to reflect on their cultural premises and stereotypes. The findings of this study propose various strategies to facilitate these self-reflections, such as reflective journals, group discussions, and peer feedback.

As for teachers, it is undeniable that they play a central role in the process of ICC skills acquisition in the classroom. Hence, the study can suggest some implications and applications that target Moroccan EFL university educators. First, it is necessary to integrate ICC into the teacher professional training programs. The findings reveal that a substantial number of Moroccan teachers do not possess adequate intercultural competencies, which has a considerable negative influence on their classroom outcomes. In order to address this gap, Moroccan teachers need to benefit from training programs that target their intercultural deficiencies and ways to integrate intercultural components into courses they deliver.

El Hadri (2022) and Tran & Seepho (2017) contend that these trainings can enable teachers to create more inclusive and culturally responsive classrooms. Furthermore, ongoing professional development should prioritize keeping teachers updated on the recent and practical ICC-related strategies. Teachers can resort to professional self-development alternatives if formal opportunities are limited.

Some implications can also be targeted to curriculum designers. In this regard, making intercultural content an important part of the EFL curriculum is indispensable. Curriculum designers should allocate more attention and effort to intercultural communicative competence as an essential element by giving it equal weight similar to other language skills rather than isolating it. They can achieve this goal in many ways, including frequent and extensive integration of culture in language classes, adequate planning of activities that enhance intercultural communicative competence, and ensuring that these activities align with broader educational objectives, to mention but a few. (Banjongjit & Boonmoh, 2018) suggested that this integrated approach will help students understand the relevance of cultural learning in their language acquisition process.

Curriculum designers can also develop effective assessment strategies for ICC based on frameworks that target the students' intercultural skills. These strategies should reflect both the cognitive and the affective aspects of ICC, and include the cultural knowledge, attitudes and behaviors. One of the most efficient methods is, undoubtedly, formative assessment. The curricula should encompass continuous and realistic assessment methods that reflect the complex nature of ICC.

6.2 Limitations

Since the research topic is quite complex and the data collection methods were extensive, various limitations were encountered during the research process. The following are some of the limitations the researcher faced:

To begin with, the greatest difficulty encountered in this study was the students and the teachers' response rate. In fact, it was challenging to gather data from informants across five universities due to geographical positions and different levels of students' willingness to participate. Sometimes, they refused to respond to the surveys which impacted the data collection negatively. In addition, it was difficult to secure teachers who were enthusiastic and willing to fill in the surveys though a convenience sampling method was applied. Thus, the extent to which the findings of this study may be generalized to the rest of Moroccan students remains unclear. The research sample of 369 for the Student Views on ICC Factors Survey

(SVICCFS) and 63 for the Teachers' Perspectives on ICC Factors Survey (TPICCFs) may not be accurately representative of students and teachers in Morocco.

One more essential limitation is related to contextual factors. The unique socio-cultural and educational specificities of Morocco influenced the findings of this study. Morocco is generally a mono-cultural society in which people share almost similar belief, norms, traditions, and styles of life. This context gives valuable insights into the state of ICC in the country, but at the same time, limits the generalizability of the results to other countries or educational settings, with different cultural and institutional dynamics.

Finally, the evolving nature of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) presents another limitation to our study. ICC is a field of knowledge that develops in a dynamic and continuous basis. The theoretical insights and practical applications that our study discussed may need additional revisions and further adaptations to keep pace with overall advances in pedagogical practices, technological advancements, and global intercultural interactions.

6.3 Suggestions for further research

Initially, this study was conducted across five large universities and aimed at reaching a larger and a more significant number of participants. However, the investigation did not take the universities students belong to as a variable. The objective was mainly determining the number of students who were willing to participate in the study and increasing the participation rate. Accordingly, it would be beneficial to conduct comparative studies between different universities and region across Morocco and outside to identify the specific enablers and challenges related to each context.

Another recommendation is the development of culturally appropriate and sensitive assessment tools. These instruments should aim at exploring the miscellaneous nature of intercultural communicative competence in Morocco. Up to now, all research works done on the Moroccan university students' ICC levels employ non-Moroccan frameworks. However, they may not adequately reflect the Moroccan cultural context. Developing instruments that take into account the country's cultural specificities can yield more valid and reliable results.

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Appendix A

The Students' Views on ICC Factors Survey Items

Categories	Factors	Items
	-Language Proficiency	1.The level of English language has impact on one's ability to understand cultural perspectives during

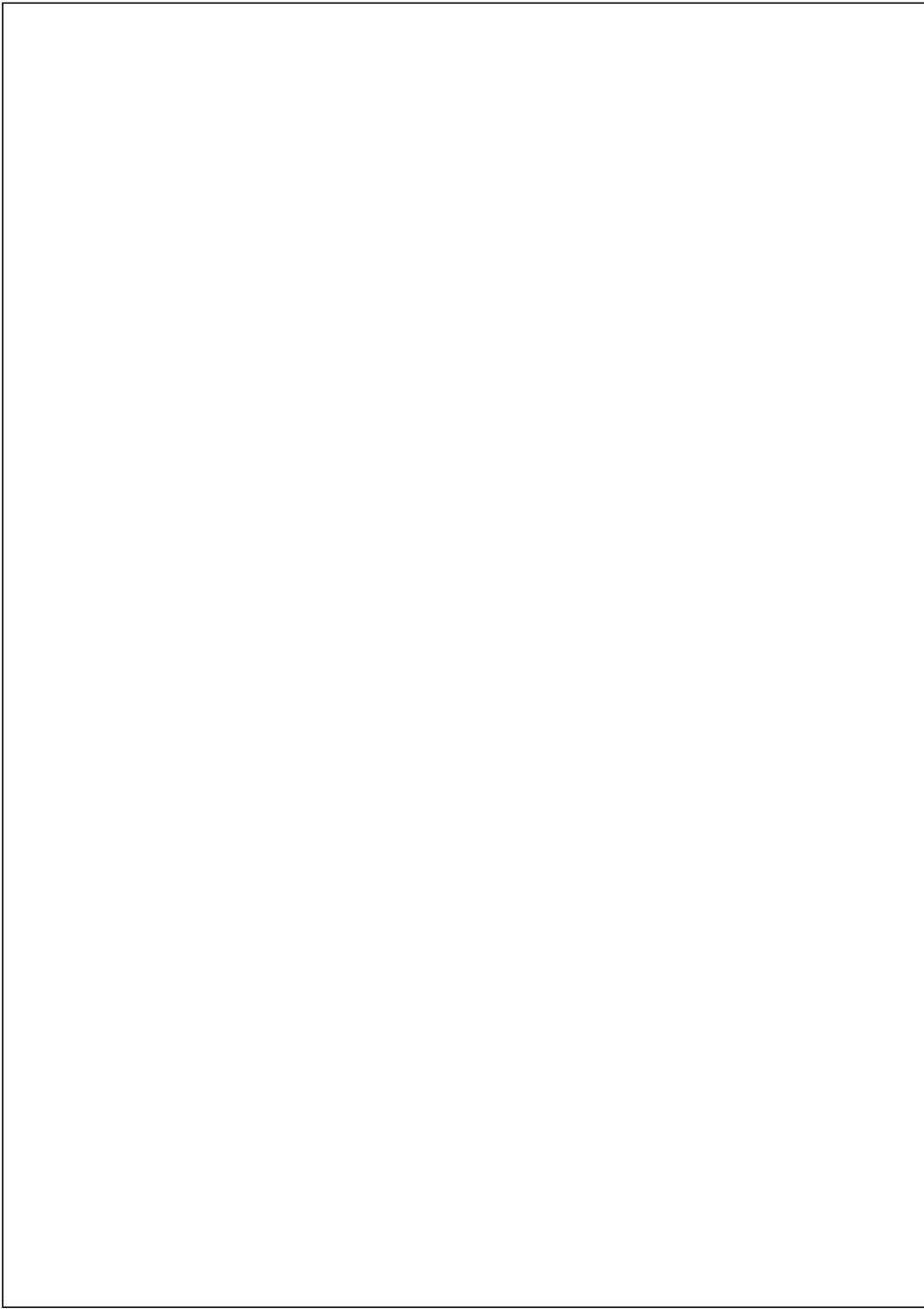
Student-related	-Cultural Knowledge	<p>communication. ⁴⁴</p> <p>2.It is crucial for EFL learners to have a high level of language proficiency to effectively communicate in diverse cultural settings.</p> <p>3.My level of cultural knowledge contributes to building empathy and fosters effective communication across different cultures.</p> <p>4.Exposure to different cultures enhances my societal and cultural understanding. ⁴⁷</p>
	-Exchange Programs	<p>5.Exchange programs provide me opportunities to engage in meaningful cross-cultural interactions and enhance my ability to communicate effectively across diverse cultural backgrounds.</p>
	-Cultural Immersion and Experiences	<p>6.Engaging in cultural immersion experiences through participating in cultural events outside my own cultural background develops my intercultural communication skills.</p>
	-Cross-Cultural Communication Training	<p>7.Cross-cultural communication training improves my ability to navigate cultural differences in various social or professional settings.</p>
Teacher-related	Teaching Methodologies/ Practices	<p>8.I have experienced educational settings that specifically emphasize intercultural communicative competence in their teaching methodology.</p> <p>9.Teaching methodologies or approaches used by the teachers have a significant impact in cultivating my intercultural communicative competence.</p> <p>10.Teaching methods or activities have been effective in helping me understand different cultures while learning English.</p>
	The Teacher's Professional Character	<p>11.I believe that teachers' professional characters are influential in fostering intercultural communicative competence among students.</p> <p>12.I have encountered teachers whose professional character positively impacted my understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures.</p> <p>13.It is important for teachers to display cultural sensitivity and openness to diverse perspectives in promoting intercultural communicative competence in the classroom.</p>
	The Teacher's Roles	<p>14. One of the principal teachers' roles is to encourage students to engage in respectful dialogue and collaboration across diverse cultural backgrounds.</p> <p>15.I have experienced instances where teachers actively promoted intercultural communication skills development using their personal skills (guiding, facilitating, monitoring.)</p>
	The Teacher's Preparedness and training	<p>16.Teachers own sufficient cultural awareness and understanding that influence their ability to guide students in developing intercultural communicative skills.</p>

17. Teachers are generally prepared to guide students towards effective communication across diverse cultural backgrounds.

Appendix B

The Teachers' Perspectives on ICC Factors Survey Items

Categories	Factors	Items
Student-related	-Language Proficiency	1. It is imperative for EFL students to achieve a high level of language proficiency to communicate within various cultural environments effectively.
	-Cultural Knowledge	2. Acquiring cultural knowledge is pivotal in nurturing proficient communication amidst diverse cultural contexts.
	-Cultural Immersion and Experiences	3. Participating in cultural events outside one's own cultural background fosters the development of intercultural communicative among students.
	-Exchange Programs	4. Exchange programs offer opportunities for substantial engagement in cross-cultural interactions that hold significant meaning and depth.
	-Cross-Cultural Communication Training	5. Cross-cultural communication training enhances students' abilities to navigate and adeptly manage cultural differences within diverse social or professional environments.
Teacher-related	-Teaching Methodologies/ Practices	6. The pedagogical methods or approaches employed by educators wield substantial influence in fostering the development of intercultural communicative proficiency.
	-The Teacher's Professional Character	7. The professional character of teachers (traits like motivation, dedication, and inspiration) exert a profound influence to enhance students' intercultural communicative skills.
	-The Teacher's Roles	8. It is imperative that teachers demonstrate cultural acuity and willingness to embrace diverse viewpoints to facilitate the development of intercultural communicative proficiency within the classroom.
	-The Teacher's Preparedness and Training	9. One of the primary roles of educators is to encourage, motivate, guide, and monitor students to engage in respectful discourse and cooperative exchanges within diverse cultural contexts.
		10. Educators possess significant cultural awareness and comprehension that directly impact their capacity to steer students towards the acquisition of intercultural communicative abilities.
		11. Educators are generally equipped to guide students toward adept communication amidst a spectrum of diverse cultural contexts.



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