

Investigating EFL Moroccan University Students' Level of Intercultural Communication Competence: School of Arts and Humanities Meknes, Morocco

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to investigate EFL Moroccan university students' level of intercultural communication competence (ICC), which is the ability to communicate effectively across cultural interactions, given its importance in the English language teaching (ELT) field especially for graduates. In order to do so, a multi-sectioned questionnaire based on the three-level ICC model proposed by Byram (1997) was administered to a total of 30 conveniently selected EFL Moroccan university students, belonging to the sixth semester of the English major, in Moulay Smail University of Arts and Human Sciences. The questionnaire was designed to tackle students' ICC knowledge, attitudes, and skills regarding their culture as well as other cultures all in hopes to discover their level of ICC and their readiness to utilize it successfully after graduation. The results revealed that the students possess enough knowledge of their culture as well as the surface-level and deep-level elements of other cultures. Moreover, the respondents displayed positive attitudes of acceptance, openness, appreciation, and respect showing no sign of ethnocentrism or negativity. The students also proved to be skillful when it comes to carrying out intercultural interactions with people from other cultures successfully.

1. INTRODUCTION

It has long been realized that culture is an asset in every sector of life. We carry culture within us everywhere, and thus, it seeps through our daily lives. Its prominent effect ranges from the way we perceive the world around us to the interpretations we attribute to what we hear. Since communication takes up a large portion of people's everyday lives, it is arguably impossible to achieve effective communication without first being aware of one's own culture as well as the people's cultural background, especially when it comes to intercultural settings.

The realization that culture is a prominent part of language and communication has been clearly reflected in the field of language teaching, specifically when it comes to foreign language teaching (FLT). Throughout the years, it has been widely recognized that communicating effectively equally includes both mastery of the linguistic elements and mastery of the cultural aspects of the target language. Since there is an interplay of language and culture, which is inseparable from communication, culture provides the background knowledge to master the communicative functions of the target language. That is, it is a prerequisite to make sense of the cultural contexts of the language to communicate effectively in intercultural situations (Frank, 2013; Lai, 2014). This realization led to a 'cultural turn' in the field of language teaching/learning, which gave rise to intercultural communication competence (ICC) (Byram, Holmes, & Savvides, 2013). Sorrells (2016) defines ICC as "the skills, knowledge, and attitudes to engage in intercultural situations effectively" (p. 234). Similarly, according to Byram's (1997) five levelled ICC model, in order to be competent, EFL learners need to be insightful of both their own culture and the foreign culture (Kramsch, 1993) to see relationships between different cultures and to critically analyze and accordingly adapt one's own behaviours, values and beliefs (Byram, 1997).

The importance of this competence was highlighted by The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] (2013), stating that the incorporation of intercultural education in all formal, informal, and non-formal schooling is a necessity. They emphasized that *learning to live together* is the key to fulfilling the 3rd pillar of education. The acquisition of ICC is exceptionally important for EFL (English as a foreign language) university students since they are bound to need it in their post-graduation journey. In order to effectively pursue a career in English teaching or go abroad to visit other countries for educational purposes, EFL university students have to be interculturally competent and knowledgeable in order to survive in new cultural and educational environments. Many researchers highlight the fact that the profile of intercultural speaker/mediator should be considered a major goal for foreign or second language teaching and learning (e.g., Byram & Zarate, 1994; Byram, 1997; Crozet, Liddicoat & Lo Bianco, 1999).

For this to be achieved, universities need to integrate a cross-cultural aspect into their curricula. Thus, the primary aim of English language learning is to train language learners to use the language appropriately and act as intercultural speakers to avoid dysfunctions and conflicts and to maintain relationships (Echcharfy & Erguig, 2020). In this sense, university students should be pre-equipped with the right ICC tools, skills and perceptions after graduation in order to effectively function and align with the demands of the globalized 21st century world today. Accordingly, the current paper aims to investigate the level of intercultural communication competence of EFL Moroccan university students. The study was based on Byram's (1997) ICC model and examined students' knowledge, ethno-relative attitudes, as well as skills of interpreting, relating, discovering and interacting with other cultures. Despite the inclusion of a course entirely dedicated to intercultural communication competence in universities, the question that remains unanswered is concerned with the effectiveness of such courses in achieving the goals and objectives of ICC and the extent to which learners develop the actual competence in its entirety.

The present study targets EFL Moroccan university students' level of ICC in order to discover their readiness to face real-life intercultural interactions and whether they are indeed equipped

with the three-dimensional concept of ICC. Particularly, the study was designed to answer three research questions: (1) Do EFL Moroccan university students have the right amount of knowledge about their culture and other cultures? (2) Do EFL Moroccan university students have the appropriate ethno-relative attitudes towards their culture and other cultures? (3) Are EFL Moroccan university students well equipped with the right ICC skills that allow them to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from other cultures?

As stated by Nadeem, Mohammed and Dalib (2020), researchers need to present a new conceptualization of intercultural communication that is suitable to their own cultural context and objectives. Since there have been no specific studies that examine the ICC level of EFL Moroccan university students, particularly semester 6 students belonging to Moulay Smail University of Arts and Humanities, the results of this study will fill a gap by providing significant data on the issue at hand that will be specific to the Moroccan educational context. The results will contribute to the betterment and development of intercultural communication competence in Moroccan universities. Although the important role of IC education has been clearly established, studies show that educators, curriculum designers and specialists need to give more time and attention to fostering students' ICs in ELT classes (Bickley et al. 2014; Weber et al. 2015; Young and Sachdev 2011, as cited in Amery 2021).

2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1. Defining Culture

Due to the complex nature of culture and the variety of meanings attributed as to what it actually stands for, there is no agreed-upon definition or theory of what it is. Culture is a loaded term; it is multidimensional, complex, and extensive, and its influence is all-encompassing. Samovar and Porter (2010) define culture as “the deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, social hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relationships, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving” (p. 8). This definition leans more towards the all-encompassing nature of culture, where it represents the essence of everything. It is important to distinguish the two major ways in which culture can be defined. First, from the humanities perspective where the focus is on the way social groups define themselves and others through material productions, including works of art, literature, social institutions, or artefacts of everyday life, and the mechanisms for their reproduction and preservation through history (Kramsch, 1995). The second definition is through the social sciences lens, and it consists of attitudes and beliefs such as ways of thinking, behaving and remembering shared by members of that community (Nostrand, 1989). Brislin provided a similar definition when he stated that culture “refers to widely shared ideals, values, formation and uses of categories, assumptions about life, and goal-directed activities that become unconsciously or subconsciously accepted as "right" and "correct" by people who identify themselves as members of society.” (Brislin, 1990, p. 11).

Kramsch (1993) made an important observation about the essence of culture, proving that it is always in the background, posing a threat to language learners, even the ones who have already acquired communicative competence, challenging them under real-world circumstances.

Based on the definitions mentioned above provided by different scholars and researchers, the common idea shared by all of them is that culture is an essential part of every aspect of human

life to the point where it affects and alters all aspects of human life (Hall, 1977). This all-encompassing effect is specifically present when it comes to language learning and acquisition, and thus, mastery of any language, whether second or foreign, relies on cultural and intercultural competencies.

2.2. The relationship between communication and culture

To understand intercultural interaction, one must first recognize the role of communication in that process. Communication, which is our ability to share our ideas and feelings, is the basis of all human contact (Samovar, Porter & McDaniel 2010). Since it has been clearly established that culture affects language, and by extension, it also deeply influences communication and communicative behaviours/ norms. Culture supplies people with countless answers about how to live in the world and how to communicate within the world. One's entire knowledge about communicative rules depends mostly on the culture in which they were raised. Culture plays the role of teacher and textbook in our lives, and it is the foundation of communication.

Consequently, communication practices may be radically different due to the diversity of cultural practices. This can be seen when certain aspects of communication change; by extension, cultural elements also change, which makes communication and culture entangled (Smith, 1966). The way that culture and communication affect each other is not unidirectional; they mutually affect each other on so many levels.

Smith (1966) also noted that "Whenever people interact, they communicate. To live in societies and to maintain their culture, they have to communicate" (p. 1). Similarly, Hall (2005) suggests that "culture is communication, and communication is culture". Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel (2010) reinforce this idea by stating, "When looking at communication and culture, it is hard to decide which is the voice and which is the echo. The reason for the duality is that you "learn" your culture via communication, while at the same time communication is a reflection of your culture" (p. 22). Culture is learned, transmitted and preserved through communication. Thus, communication and culture mutually contain each other.

Each culture imposes certain communication norms expected within its context. Every culture has a unique definition of what the ideal communication style consists of. Consequently, it is necessary to be aware of these striking differences that exist beyond one's own cultural identity, accept them, and consider them when dealing with individuals belonging to other cultures.

2.3. Defining Intercultural Communication competence

The interdisciplinary nature of the field of intercultural communication allows IC research to be conducted in a vast variety of academic disciplines such as education, language teaching/ learning, communication studies, cultural anthropology, and behavioural psychology, amongst many others. This makes it hard to present a uniform definition of IC due to the complexity of its constituents. Studies promote a wide range of expressions used interchangeably, such as cross-cultural awareness, global competitive intelligence, cultural competence, cultural sensitivity, ethno-relativity, international competence, intercultural interaction, biculturalism, multiculturalism, etc. (Fantini, 2006; Mertesacker, 2010, Yussefi, 2011, as cited in Golub 2014) In spite of the striking differences of the said concepts, for the sake of the current study the focus will be on the three essential components of intercultural competence: knowledge, attitudes, and skills.

The past two decades have witnessed a general agreement concerning the conceptualization of intercultural communication competence; many scholars agree that appropriateness and effectiveness are key words to define ICC. Spitzberg (2000, p.259) defines it as “an impression that a behaviour is appropriate and effective in a given context”. Chen and Starosta (1998) define intercultural communication competence as “the ability to effectively and appropriately execute communication behaviours to elicit a desired response in a specific environment” (p.27). Similarly, Rogers and Steinfatt (1999) define ICC as the ability to exchange information effectively and appropriately with individuals belonging to other cultures. In general, researchers have studied the concept of ICC from three approaches: cross-cultural attitude approach, behavior-skill approach and developmental approach.

2.4. Byram’s ICC model (conceptual model of the study)

There exist many models of intercultural communication offered by researchers across different domains of study. Each one of them is influenced by their research orientation and objectives. Nonetheless, the most popular model in the educational context is the one proposed by Byram (1997), known as intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Byram’s (1995) model of ICC was later reformulated, and new notions or ‘saviours’ were added in order to integrate other aspects that guarantee an effective intercultural speaker, who according to him, is ‘conscious of their own perspective, of the way in which their thinking is culturally determined, rather than believing that their understanding and perspective is natural’ (Byram, 2000). Byram’s (1997) model is suitable for the present paper because it proved to be useful in the field of foreign language education and also because it is arguably the most conceptually reliable model to measure and assess ICC.

Therefore, becoming interculturally fluent necessitates the combination of certain attitudes, knowledge and skills to be promoted along with the learner’s linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competence. Accordingly, Byram (1997) identifies the following components of ICC within foreign language education:

Knowledge: the learner should demonstrate knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in one’s and one’s interlocutor’s country and the general processes of societal and individual interaction (Byram, 1997). In other words, being able to analyze facts about one’s own culture as well as the target culture.

Attitudes: the learner demonstrates attitudes of curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one’s own with the willingness to put oneself in the shoes of others is what makes an intercultural speaker rather than a mere bilingual or a fluent fool (Byram, 1997; Mahdy et al., 2020). At this level, the learner should get over stereotypes about the native culture and the other cultures.

Skills: the learner demonstrates an ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one’s own, along with the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction (Byram, 1997, p. 52).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design

The descriptive survey design was used for this study and administered to a selected sample consisting of semester six EFL Moroccan students from Moulay Smail School of Arts and Humanities Meknes. This type of research design is particularly used for the sake of describing what exists, determining the frequency with which it occurs, and categorizing the information accordingly. The survey involved the administration of a questionnaire which sought to obtain data on the level of intercultural communication competence of the sample, as mentioned above, following a three-level model consisting of knowledge, attitudes, and skills. The information collected from respondents enables the answer to the research questions.

3.2. Data collection techniques

Given the circumstances under which the current study was conducted, and because the researcher could not administer the questionnaire directly to the respondents in a face-to-face manner, the researcher opted for an online questionnaire. Ideally, manual administration would be the best option since it guarantees a high response rate, more exposure to the population, and a high likeliness of authentic responses. However, the latter option was unattainable due to the national lockdown of all universities nationwide; thus, students were unavailable and unreachable. The researcher seized the only probable option, which was reaching out to students via social media platforms, such as Facebook and WhatsApp groups, by posting the online survey questionnaire on different groups dedicated specifically to S6 EFL university students belonging to the Faculty of Arts and Humanities Meknes.

3.3. The design and development of the questionnaire

The questionnaire used in the present study consisted of three parts, following the theoretical framework adopted in this research project, namely Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communication competence. In addition, some of the questions were adopted from Koumachi's (2015) study, where he assessed Moroccan EFL university students' ICC; his study's objectives go in line with the present study's.

Accordingly, the first section of the questionnaire labelled 'knowledge' consisted of eleven questions with varied forms, containing questions and statements to test the level of student's knowledge about their culture as well as other cultures, the type of cultural knowledge they have, that is, if they are aware of the surface-level aspects of cultures or the deeply-rooted aspects and values; and their knowledge about the interactional habits of people from other

cultures. The first part of the questionnaire was added in order to provide answers to the first research question established at the beginning.

The second section of the questionnaire, titled ‘attitudes’, focused on the second element from Byram’s model *savoir être/ attitudes and values*, which reflects curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one’s own. The section comprised eleven items, most of which were in a Likert scale format since it is the most suitable form to gather information about respondents’ attitudes and beliefs. This section focused on answering the second research question regarding students’ attitudes about their culture in comparison to other cultures, their ethnocentric and ethno-relative tendencies, the way they perceive their culture and foreign cultures, as well as their levels of acceptance and tolerance.

The third section of the questionnaire tackles ICC skills, which include both *savoir comprendre / skills of interpreting and comparing*, the ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one’s own as well as *savoir apprendre/savoir-faire/skills* which is the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction (Byram, 2008). This section contains ten items, questions and statements that investigate students’ readiness to utilize all the ICC elements appropriately in real-life interactions through different situations. The section also investigates students’ willingness to learn more about other cultures and their willingness to make efforts in order to understand and negotiate with people from other cultures.

3.4. Sample

The population for this study comprised all EFL Moroccan university students. Specifically, 56 students were selected for the sample that consisted of 30 participants for one main reason: they have been exposed to the intercultural communication competence course and, therefore, are ready to be tested and answer questions about the subject and its elements. In addition to this, in reference to their linguistic level, this category of students is proficient enough to verbalize and discuss issues related to ICC. The sample was conveniently chosen. The study was conducted at School of Arts and Humanities in Meknes during the second term of the 2019-2020 academic year. The sample was reached and collected via social media platforms, namely, Facebook and WhatsApp groups, that were created to make communication outside the classroom better and more efficient since in-class lessons were cancelled. The researcher contacted the students by posting the online questionnaire on the platforms and asking students who fit the desired sample requirements to participate kindly.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

4.1. Section one: intercultural communication competence knowledge.

Table 1: Knowledge

	Characteristics	n	%
How many states are there in the United States?			
	55	2	6.7
	50	26	86.7
	49	2	6.7
Who rules the United Kingdom?			
	Queen Elizabeth	23	76.7
	The prime minister	3	10.0
	Donald Trump	2	6.7
	Congress	1	3.3
	The monarchy and Parliament	1	3.3
What is the name of the prime minister of Morocco?			
	Saad-Eddine El Othmani	30	100.0
What is the most popular Asian holiday?			
	Hanukkah	3	10.0
	Chinese New Year	26	86.7
	Easter	1	3.3
When (the date) is Aid Kbir celebrated?			
	10th of Dhu al-Hijjah	25	83.3
	I do not know	5	16.7
Why is Christmas celebrated?			
	To welcome the new year	2	6.7
	To remember the birth of Jesus Christ	28	93.3
Name two famous British dishes.			
	Correct answer	23	76.7
	Wrong answer	7	32.3
Name two famous American dishes.			
	Correct answer	24	80.0
	Wrong answer	6	20.0
When young American or British people introduce their friends to their parents, the friends say?			
	Say nice to meet you and Shake hands	27	90.0
	Say hello and hug	3	10.0
When you think about Moroccan culture, what comes to mind ?			
	Collectivism		
	Not selected	22	73.3
	Selected	8	26.7
	Intolerance		
	Not selected	29	96.7
	Selected	1	3.3
	Diversity		
	Not selected	23	76.7
	Selected	7	23.3
	Hospitality		
	Not selected	11	36.7

	Selected	19	63.3
	Clothing and music		
	Not selected	20	66.7
	Selected	10	33.3
	Food and dishes		
	Not selected	7	23.3
	Selected	23	76.7
When you think about American culture, what aspects come to mind?			
	Pop music and Hip-hop		
	Not selected	21	70.0
	Selected	9	30.0
	Fashion		
	Not selected	28	93.3
	Selected	2	6.7
	Movies		
	Not selected	9	30.0
	Selected	21	70.0
	Diversity		
	Not selected	21	70.0
	Selected	9	30.0
	Racism		
	Not selected	19	63.3
	Selected	11	36.7
	Individualism		
	Not selected	15	50.0
	Selected	15	50.0

When EFL Moroccan university students were asked about their knowledge of their culture and foreign cultures, the results represented in table 1 display a promising level of ICC knowledge on the part of the respondents. For instance, the vast majority of the sample provided correct answers. Whether it was about the basic knowledge of popular accessible information or the more complex knowledge of values and cultural patterns, the respondents proved to be interculturally knowledgeable indeed. The respondents are well informed about different aspects of their culture and foreign cultures such as politics, national and religious holidays, food and dishes, and greeting patterns. Concerning the next section of ICC knowledge, a statement was provided to discover the elements that learners associate with their native culture; the respondents were requested to select three out of six elements that come to their mind when they think about the Moroccan culture. It can be clearly noted from table 1 that the respondents did not associate the Moroccan culture with the negative concept of intolerance since 96,7% of the total sample did not select intolerance. Similarly, the element of diversity was not selected by the majority. On the other hand, the majority (63,3%) of the

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students associated the Moroccan culture with hospitality, while 76,7% of them also selected food and dishes as a major part of the native culture.

Similarly, the respondents were requested to select three out of six elements that come to their mind when they think about the American culture in order to discover the elements that learners associate with the target cultures. The respondents showed little to no attention towards the musical (70,0% did not select) and clothing (93,3% did not select) aspects of the American culture. On the contrary, 70,0% of the respondents associate American culture with movies due to the prominent role they play in helping students learn English. It is also worth mentioning that 63,3% of the participants relate racism to the American culture, while 50,0% pointed out the individualistic nature of the culture.

4.2. Section two: intercultural communication competence attitudes.

Table 2 : Attitudes

Characteristics	n	%
The Moroccan culture is better and superior than other cultures.		
Strongly disagree	16	53.3
Disagree	2	6.7
Neutral	10	33.3
Agree	2	6.7
Strongly agree	0	0.0
The Moroccan culture is inferior compared to the American culture.		
Strongly disagree	21	70.0
Disagree	3	10.0
Neutral	6	20.0
Agree	0	0.0
Strongly agree	0	0.0
Some aspects of the Moroccan culture should be replaced with aspects from another culture.		
Strongly disagree	10	33.3
Disagree	4	13.3
Neutral	4	13.3
Agree	8	26.7
Strongly agree	4	13.3
Some cultures are better and superior than others.		
Strongly disagree	18	60.0
Disagree	2	6.7
neutral	8	26.7
Agree	1	3.3
Strongly agree	1	3.3
All cultures are equal; no culture is better or superior than the others.		
Strongly disagree	2	6.7

	Disagree	1	3.3
	Neutral	3	10.0
	Agree	0	0.0
	Strongly agree	24	80.0
Moroccan religious practices (e.g. Ramadan) are better than the religious practices of other cultures.			
	Strongly disagree	13	43.3
	Disagree	8	26.7
	Neutral	6	20.0
	Agree	0	0.0
	Strongly agree	3	10.0
Do you consider both Americans and British people urbane and sophisticated when you compare them to your people?			
	Yes	19	63.3
	No	6	20.0
	Neutral	5	16.7
Do you wish you could talk like the American or British do?			
	Yes	13	43.3
	No	9	30.0
	Neutral	8	26.7
Would you prefer to be born in another culture different from the Moroccan one?			
	Yes	16	53.3
	No	8	26.7
	Neutral	6	20.0
Some stereotypes hold true for some cultures.			
	Strongly disagree	4	13.3
	Disagree	5	16.7
	Neutral	11	36.7
	Agree	7	23.3
	Strongly agree	3	10.0
An American friend invited you, but when you got there, he introduced you to his Jewish friend. How would you react?			
	Smile and shake hands	29	96.7
	Smile and do not shake hands	1	3.3
	Not smile and not shake hands	0	0.0

The findings gathered from the second section, titled Attitudes, display the overall positive attitudes of EFL Moroccan university students with regard to Moroccan culture and foreign cultures. The respondents clearly demonstrated that they do not perceive their native culture in a superior way, which can be noticed in Table 2, 53,3% of the respondents strongly disagreed with the statement that the Moroccan culture is superior. In addition, the participants did not think that the American culture is better compared to the Moroccan one (24 (70,0% SD and

10,0% D) out of 30 respondents disagreed with the statement “the Moroccan culture is inferior compared to the American culture”). Furthermore, the majority of the responses (66,7%: 60,0% SD and 6,7% D) in Table 2 reinforced the fact that no culture is better nor superior than others and that all cultures are equally important and valuable, which reflects their equalitarian way of perceiving other cultures including their own. The results reported before also show that the learners do not perceive their religious traditions and practices as superior compared to other religious practices while also showing acceptance and tolerance towards people belonging to other religions and cultures. All participants are willing to smile and shake hands in an interaction with a Jewish person, which reflects positive attitudes of acceptance and tolerance. It is worth mentioning that the participants highly value the Moroccan culture and are not willing to change anything about it or replace it.

Nevertheless, the majority of the sample expressed their desire to speak like the Americans or British do which shows the importance of the native speaker notion in achieving competence according to them. Although the respondents reflected positive attitudes toward ICC, a large number believed that some stereotypes held in some cases, while others had a neutral point of view regarding the statement; this shows that it is extremely challenging for learners to dispose of the negative perceptions related to other cultures even when they are untrue. Overall, it can be concluded that EFL Moroccan university students hold positive and ethno-relative ICC attitudes that display flexibility, tolerance, acceptance, respect and appreciation of their culture as well as foreign cultures.

4.3. Section three: intercultural communication competence skills.

Table 3: Skills

Characteristics	n	%
How often do you communicate with people from other cultures?		
Never	1	3.3
Occasionally	5	16.7
Sometimes	7	23.3
Often	10	33.3
always	7	23.3
Do you always succeed in intercultural interactions (interacting with people from other cultures)?		
Yes	24	80.0
No	2	6.7
Neutral	4	13.3
How do you deal with the communication breakdowns that arise?		
I try to overcome the problems in different ways	16	53.3
I have never faced any problems	11	36.7
I do not know	3	10.0
You made a friend through the internet, and you happen to invite him/her to your house, but to your surprise he/she turns out to be racist towards your culture. How would you treat him/her?		

	Try to explain and enlighten him/her about your culture	26	86.7
	Be racist towards his/her culture	0	0.0
	Insult him/her and stop being friends	0	0.0
	Ignore his/her behavior and move on	4	13.3
A foreign colleague behaved inappropriately towards you. How would you react back?			
	Tolerate his/her act	7	23.3
	Ask why and complain	22	73.3
	Insult him/her	1	3.3
If you consider traveling abroad, what would you do to prepare for your trip in order to be culturally knowledgeable?			
	Read about the famous restaurants and historical monuments	2	6.7
	Read about the cultural values and beliefs of that place	16	53.3
	Make sure you do not do anything offensive or disrespectful	10	33.3
	No preparation, be content with your own cultural knowledge	2	6.7
If ever you want to know about how the others think about your culture, how would you proceed in your quest?			
	Ask people from other cultures directly	14	46.7
	Read books and articles	3	10.0
	Use the internet and media	13	43.3
Do you like learning about other cultures?			
	Yes	30	100.0
	No	0	0.0
	Neutral	0	0.0
If yes, what aspects of those cultures would you like to know?			
	Food and customs	1	3.3
	Music and arts	2	6.7
	Values and life perceptions	18	60.0
	Beliefs and religion	0	0.0
	Everyday life	7	23.3
	History	2	6.7
When you first know about the differences between another culture and your own, what is your reaction?			
	Try to find similarities between the two cultures	4	13.3
	Accept the differences and learn more about them	26	86.7
	Be aware of the differences and not accept them	0	0.0
	Have a bad impression about the whole culture	0	0.0

The findings illustrated in Table 3, dedicated to ICC skills, show that the large majority of respondents have actually interacted with people from other cultures which reinforces the high likelihood of encountering an intercultural situation. Similarly, the majority of those who have already interacted with foreigners successfully carry out the conversations without any difficulty or struggle. It can also be noticed from table 3 that even if the learners face potential communicative difficulties, the majority (53,3%) are willing to make efforts in order to

overcome the problems and utilize different communicative tools and techniques. When faced with negative or racist behaviour from the other party involved, EFL Moroccan university students expressed their willingness to cooperate and educate people from other cultures so that they become more acceptant and respectful of the Moroccan culture. The participants also expressed their continuous readiness to learn and discover about cultures different from their own; the majority (86,6%) of students were inclined to learn about more profound aspects of other cultures either by reading about the cultural values and beliefs of the host country or by making sure they would not do anything offensive or disrespectful to the people of the host culture.

Correspondingly, EFL Moroccan university students are keen to do all the necessary preparations before entering the territory of a new culture by learning about the cultural values and beliefs of that place and being cautious in order not to offend its people. It is worth noting that all participants would like to learn about other cultures, which shows their openness and readiness to expand their knowledge of foreign cultures. (60,0% of the respondents expressed their interest to learn about the values and life perceptions of other cultures, while 23,3% were interested in learning about everyday life aspects of other cultures). Even when the differences between the native culture and the foreign cultures are striking, the learners react in a non-judgmental manner, 86,7% of them accept the differences and try to learn more about them. They attempt to understand better the cultural differences that exist while also focusing on the similarities between cultures.

5. DISCUSSION

ICC knowledge encompasses different kinds of cultural elements, ranging from surface-level information that does not require much effort to be acquired to deep-level cultural knowledge of values, traditions, customs, and communicative patterns and norms that are profoundly rooted in any culture. Consequently, ICC knowledge entails having knowledge about one's own culture as well as a level of awareness of behaviours that are culture-bound. Weaver (1993) argues that culturally shaped knowledge is, in large part, invisible and, therefore, mostly subconsciously affects our daily interactions. Corder and Mackey (2011) reinforce that the ability to notice, critically analyze and reflect is essential for learning and development to blossom, which can only happen if learners possess the knowledge and skill to reflect and interpret experiences by relating them to themselves and others.

In the current study, the vast majority of the sample provided correct answers regarding the questions in the knowledge section. Similarly, Koumachi (2015) also found that Moroccan EFL learners possessed factual knowledge about their own culture as well as the Americans' culture which reflects, to some extent, their intercultural proficiency. In the same way, Manjet et al.'s (2017) findings show that students' cultural knowledge about both the American and the Moroccan cultures is positive after being exposed to the intercultural communication competence course. Additionally, the results obtained by El Hiani (2018) (as cited in Echcharfy 2020) revealed that Moroccan EFL learners have an average level of knowledge area, which proves that learners are knowledgeable about cultural elements and facts. Echcharfy and Erguig's (2020) findings reflect that EFL Moroccan students demonstrated good cultural knowledge and thus represent the intercultural speaker's profile coined by Byram (1997).

However, it can be concluded from the current study that although EFL Moroccan university students have a good level of ICC knowledge they simultaneously display bias in the sense that they associated the Moroccan culture with positive elements and the American culture with relatively negative elements. This indicates the complexity of ICC as a competence and the need for more efforts on the part of educators and learners to banish all kinds of negative misconceptions about cultures.

Attitudes dictate and guide the way we think, perceive, feel, and evaluate the world; thus, the attitudes that learners have towards various aspects of life are of paramount importance. The goal of ICC is to foster attitudes of openness, curiosity, acceptance, and ethno-relativity in EFL learners so as to achieve the ultimate objective of making them intercultural speakers. It is clearly evident from the results that EFL learners hold positive and ethno-relative ICC attitudes. The current findings go in line with Belli (2018) results which proved that the majority of ELT students displayed positive attitudes towards the incorporation of culture into their language learning which was shown through their reactions to the cultural knowledge they are introduced through teachers, materials, and course books.

Acquiring the skills component of the three-fold ICC model presented before allows the learner to understand and flexibly move between the native culture and the foreign cultures by utilizing all the ICC components to handle cross-cultural constraints. Once learners obtain ICC skills, they can successfully interpret and relate features from another culture to their own, willingly acquire new knowledge of a culture, and eventually make use of their intercultural communication competence to face intercultural encounters effectively. This indicates one's skills for grasping new knowledge through listening, observing, and evaluating and for using that knowledge by analyzing, interpreting, and relating in the new situation (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2004). Additionally, skills also refer to the ability to build relationships, communicate across cultures, reflect and adapt, as well as be knowledgeable of oneself and other cultures. It can confidently be confirmed that the bulk of skills mentioned above were demonstrated by the respondents which reinforces the fact that EFL Moroccan learners have the ICC skills required to carry out any intercultural encounter perfectly while still showing the desire to learn more about different cultures constantly. This is reflected in Koumachi's (2015) study, where he found that Moroccan EFL learners have shown clear signs of intercultural skills; he also disconfirms the hypothesis that Moroccan EFL university students do not have enough know-how/savoir-faire of culture that enables them to be aware of the differences between their native culture and the target culture.

6. CONCLUSION

The field of English language teaching/learning has always been subject to ongoing change and modification, all in hopes to promote competent English speakers and thinkers. Although the meaning of competence has initiated discussions and given rise to a variety of interpretations within the ELT field, the term is currently associated with intercultural communication and the ability to function effectively in the global world as an intercultural speaker. In the same light, this research particularly attempted to investigate the intercultural communication competence level of EFL Moroccan university students. It can be inferred from the findings obtained that Moroccan university students have the right amount of cultural knowledge related to both their native culture and other cultures. They also reflected a positive array of attitudes in regard to the way they perceive their culture as well as other cultures

different from their own, illustrating an ethnorelative mindset. Additionally, the learners are well-equipped with the necessary ICC skills that will potentially help them navigate through any kind of intercultural encounter. The results gathered show a promising and high level of ICC on the part of the students; however, it cannot be guaranteed that the students will actually display their intercultural competence when faced with realistic cross-cultural encounters that might be extremely challenging or shocking to some extent.

It is worth mentioning that the results of this study may be particularly interesting within the field of English language teaching and learning. As has already been heavily emphasized in this paper, intercultural communication competence is a crucial part of today's language class. Thus, teachers, syllabus designers and policymakers are expected to put in efforts in order to foster interculturally competent individuals.

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