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Bridging the Intercultural Divide: Sensitivity and Competence in Moroccan EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

Globalisation has thrust English into the spotlight as a lingua franca and amplified ELT calls to prioritise intercultural communication. Still, there is a crucial gap when it comes to giving teachers the Intercultural Communication Sensitivity (ICS) they need to help their students develop Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC).This study examines the Intercultural Communication Sensitivity (ICS) of Moroccan English as Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. The research investigates the gap between language proficiency and Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). The study surveyed 39 EFL teachers using the AISS. Key results reveal that they possess robust ICS, which enable them to engage respectfully and openly with people from different cultures. The study also explored potential factors influencing ICS, such as age, gender, and experience in English-speaking countries. More importantly, no significant correlation was found between Total Sensitivity and Socio-demographic Factors. The results send a clear message to stakeholders that the Moroccan context is conducive to developing Intercultural Competence Sensitivity.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rise of technology and English as a lingua franca has encouraged increased interaction between diverse cultures and created both opportunities and challenges(Christiansen, 2015; Salomone, 2022), and revived debates and discussion over an old new concept, "intercultural communication" (Sarbaugh, 1979; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005). Recent developments in the field of ICC have led to a renewed interest in effective intercultural communication, which hinges on understanding this complex domain (the interplay between language and culture)(AlTaher, 2020; Makhmudov, 2020). Previous studies have reported that equipping EFL teachers with intercultural communication competence (ICC, henceforth) is crucial to prepare their students for meaningful engagement in multicultural

environments (Braslauskas, 2021). This necessitates not only linguistic proficiency, but also cultural awareness and sensitivity of the target language and culture combined. Although some research has been carried out on ICC in the Moroccan context, there have been few theoretical investigations into the issue, and very few empirical studies on ICS in Moroccan EFL teachers. Most existing research is exploratory in nature and primarily focuses on students' perceptions about the role of ICC in EFL classrooms (Elboubekri, 2017). However, there have been no empirical studies which investigated the level of ICS among in-service EFL teachers in Morocco and compared differences across socio-demographic variables. This study seeks to fill these research gaps and hence help remedy this research problem by first analysing the available literature on the topic, and then empirically investigate the level of ICC in EFL teachers. This scholarly venture is supposed to arm stakeholders with empirical evidence to inform effective teacher training programs, ultimately contribute to improved classroom interaction, increased cross-cultural tolerance and understanding in Moroccan EFL classrooms.

1.1. Rationale and Purpose

This study attempts to investigate the level of intercultural sensitivity (ICS) among Moroccan EFL teachers and recognise its significance in promoting effective cultural teaching and preparing future generations for intercultural interactions. Fostering ICS in Moroccan students is essential for them to thrive in such a foreign language learning context. Nevertheless, achieving this goal heavily relies on the ICS of their EFL instructors. Hence, there is a dire need for such studies, which are geared towards assessing Moroccan EFL teachers' ICS levels. The results of this study will provide valuable insights for policymakers, educational authorities, and ELT supervisors. Based on the existing pool of knowledge on the topic (Drandić, 2016; Fritz et al., 2001; Gedik Bal, 2023; Kim & Connelly, 2019; Leung et al., 2014; Leutwyler et al., 2014; Tabatadze & Gorgadze, 2014), such insights are supposed to inform initiatives aimed at boosting ICS among both teachers and their students, creating a ripple effect of positive intercultural understanding.

1.2. The Objectives of the Study

Intercultural sensitivity plays a crucial role in effective English language teaching (EFL) in today's globalised world(Altan, 2018; Hammer et al., 2003). This study investigates the self-perceived intercultural attitudes of Moroccan EFL teachers applying the Abridged Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (AISS). The researchers aim at achieving two research objectives:

1) To quantify the average level of Intercultural Sensitivity (ICS) among in-service EFL teachers in Morocco.
2) To determine whether individual background factors, including gender, age, education level, teaching experience, and cultural experience, have a statistically significant influence on the level of Intercultural Sensitivity (ICS) among Moroccan EFL teachers.

1.3. Research Questions

To achieve the objectives of the study, two main research questions were raised:

1) What is the average level of intercultural sensitivity among Moroccan in-service EFL teachers?
2) Do individual background factors (gender, age, education level, teaching experience, and cultural experience) influence intercultural sensitivity levels?

In brief, achieving the study objectives and answering the research questions will help get multiple insights into the intercultural competence of Moroccan EFL teachers and inform potential efforts to improve their cultural awareness (sensitivity) and teaching practices.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
2.1. Language Definitions

Numerous definitions of language exist across disciplines. Linguists have proposed various definitions for the term "language", widely (indeed unanimously) depicted as a system of symbols facilitating communication within a social group (a language community) (Denes, 2012; Laitin, 2000; Trask, 2003; Wegner, 1972; Winograd, 1980). Brown (1994), echoing the inseparability of language and culture, emphasises their interwoven nature, crucial for second and foreign language education.

2.2. Culture, Linguistic Universalism, and Relativity

Culture is defined by Hofstede (2009)as the collective programming of the mind that differentiates one group from another. This programming includes norms, values, socialization, and upbringing- all of which present challenges in transitioning away from ethnocentrism toward ethnorelativism. For accuracy's sake, it is worth noting that Agar (1994)introduced "languaculture" to describe how language and culture interact when people communicate meaning. Reportedly, understanding language goes beyond memorising grammatical rules. It involves a distinct interplay between universal human capacities and the specificities of cultural and linguistic environments. In this respect, Brown (1994) stresses the inseparability of language and culture and emphasises their pivotal role in learning and teaching processes. In harmony, Fruchter (2018) denotes the dichotomy between linguistic universalism and relativity and emphasises their complementary aspects.

2.3. Linguistic Competence and Models of Communicative Competence

Chomsky (1965)defines linguistic competence as the ideal language system, which focuses on grammatical and sentential levels. The definition in question is critiqued by scholars like Hymes (1972), which led to the development of comprehensive models of communicative competence that include grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic components. Alternative models, such as those proposed by Campbell and Wales (1970), Dell Hymes (1972), and Canale and Swain (1980), expanded on Chomsky's linguistic competence, incorporating sociolinguistic and strategic dimensions.

2.4.The Ethnography of Communication and Intercultural Sensitivity

Hymes (1972) criticises Chomsky's narrow focus on linguistic competence and introduces communicative competence, to shed light on social reality's influence on behaviour. This new vision broadens the understanding of language use beyond Chomsky's linguistic competence(Farah, 1997; Noy, 2017; Saville-Troike, 2008).Bennett (1986)introduces intercultural communication competence. The latter put emphasis on five savoirs: attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. Thus, the necessity to develop and nurture one's intercultural sensitivity in a globalised world is widely underscored (Chocce, 2014). Various models and measurement tools, such as the Intercultural Development Inventory, Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory, and Intercultural Sensitivity Inventory, have been devised and are being continually upgraded to aid the assessment of the concept under study (Fritz et al., 2001; Hammer et al., 2003; Paige et al., 2003; Reid, 2013).

2.5. Assessment of Intercultural Sensitivity

Scholars and field experts have devised several Intercultural Sensitivity measurement tools. In this regard, Chen and Starosta (1998) differentiate between intercultural awareness, sensitivity, and adroitness, and propose a precise measurement tool, widely known as the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS)(Chen & Starosta, 2000). It is important to note that the ISS is chosen in this study to investigate EFL teachers' sensitivity toward interacting with people from different cultures with a view of aligning with the study objectives.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study aims at measuring the intercultural sensitivity of Moroccan in-service EFL teachers. The researchers opted for a quantitative research approach, grounded on the objectives of the study, the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) literature, and the affective aspect represented by intercultural sensitivity scale (ISS). The quantitative approach was chosen, here, due to its objectivity, accuracy, and the ability to obtain measurable, reliable, and valid data for numerical and statistical analysis (Apuke, 2017; Fischer et al., 2023; Lazaraton, 2005).

3.1. Research Design

In more practical terms, this study adopted a descriptive correlational survey design. This design provides static pictures of situations and establishes associations between variables (Fischer et al., 2023; Monsen & Van Horn, 2007). It was employed to investigate EFL teachers' average level of intercultural sensitivity and account for differences based on socio-demographic factors**.**

3.2. Data Collection

Data were collected through an online survey using the Abridged Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (AISS) by Wang & Zhou (2016), adapted from Chen & Starosta (1996, 1997, 2000). This study utilised a two-part survey. The survey included demographic information and the 15-item AISS:

Part 1: Gathered demographic information on gender, age, education, teaching experience, and intercultural exposure (living in another culture).
Part 2: Assessed intercultural sensitivity using the 15-item Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS-15) by Wang & Zhou (2016).

3.3. Rationale for Using ISS-15

The original 24-item ISS by Chen & Starosta (2000) was shortened to improve cultural adaptability and maintain reliable measurement in non-English contexts. The ISS-15 retains the five core dimensions of intercultural sensitivity: *interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment,* and *interaction attentiveness*. Each dimension is represented by three items. Respondents rated their agreement with each statement on a 5-point Likert scale.

3.4. Research Site

The study was conducted in the Provincial Directorate of National Education and Training in Ifrane, Fes-Meknes Academy, Morocco. The study participants were recruited

using purposive sampling, which helped recruiting active members of the ELT community in the region.

3.5. The Participants' Demographics

The study sample includes 51 out 86 (in total) EFL teachers with diverse socio-demographic backgrounds. This is a modest attempt to safeguard representation across various factors such as *gender, age, education level, teaching experience,* and *cultural experience*. For further details, kindly refer to Figures 1, 2,3, 4, and 5.
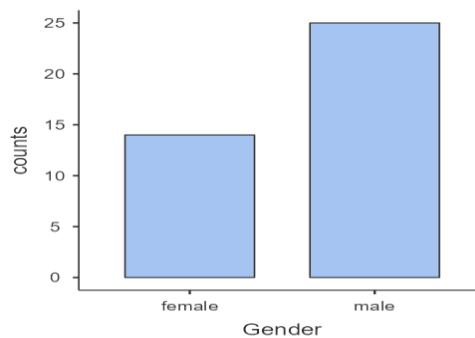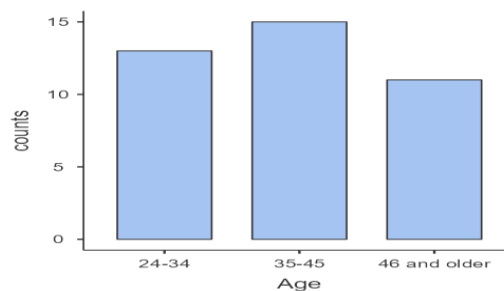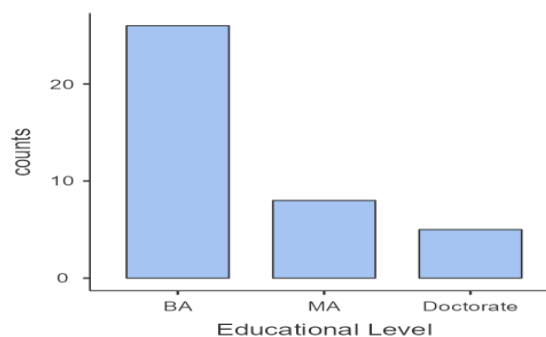
Figure 1: *The Participants' Gender*

Figure 1 shows that females constituted slightly more than a third (35.90%) of the participants, whereas males represented nearly two-thirds (64.10%).

Figure 2: *The Participants' Age*

As for the age groups of the participants, Figure 2 shows that their ages ranged from 24 to 46 and older. The age group 24-34 made up a third of the respondents (33,3%), the age group 35-45 represented (38.5%), and the age group 46 and older (28.2%).

Figure 3:*The Distribution of Participants across the Educational Level*

As for the educational level of the respondents, Figure 3 shows that BA holders made up two-thirds (66.67%). MA holders/ MA students constituted approximately a quarter (20.51%) while doctoral students represented 12.82%. of the total participants.

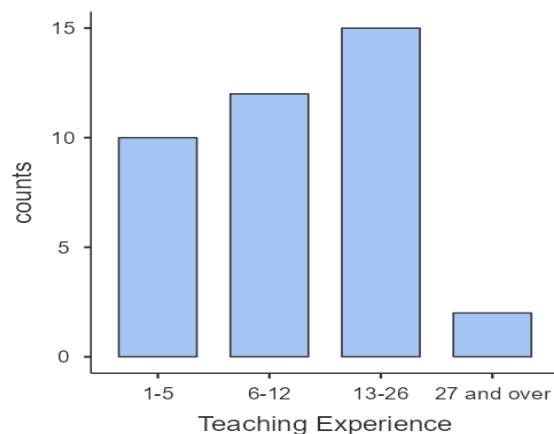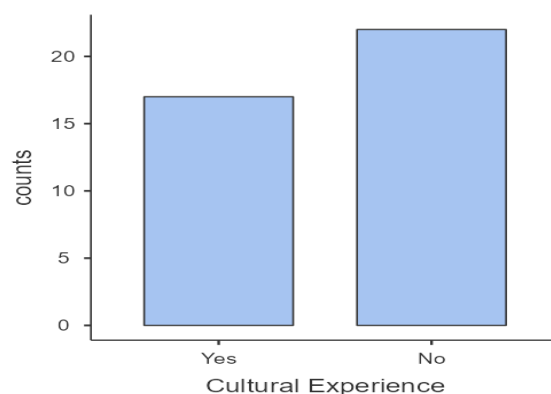**Figure 4 :***Participants according to Teaching Experience*

Figure 4 demonstrates the distribution of teaching experience across four categories. Of the total, 25.6% have 1-5 years of experience, 30.8% have 6-12 years, and 38.5% have 13-26 years. Only 5.1% have over 27 years of experience, making up the smallest group. Generally, most individuals have mid to extensive teaching experience, reflecting a balanced distribution.

Figure 5 :*Participants' Cultural Experience*

3.6. Data Analysis

To reiterate, this study was geared towards:

1) Assessing the average level of intercultural sensitivity among Moroccan EFL teachers.
2) Identifying potential differences in sensitivity based on sociodemographic factors (gender, age, education, experience, cultural exposure).

3.7. Data Analysis Procedures

Data was imported into Jamovi for analysis. Negatively keyed items (3, 4, 5, 6, 10, 11, 12) in the ISS-15 were reverse-coded for consistency. Likert scale order was reversed to match the scoring direction (5 = strongly agree to 1 = strongly disagree).

4. RESULTS
4.1. Descriptive Statistics
4.1.1. The Average Level of Intercultural Sensitivity Dimensions among Moroccan In-Service EFL Teachers
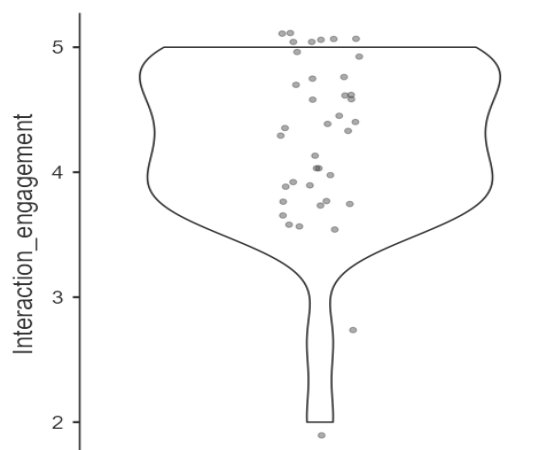a) **Dimension 1: Interaction Engagement**

The mean score of 4.25 and a median of 4.33 suggest that, on average, Moroccan EFL teachers exhibit a relatively high level of interaction engagement. Both the mean and median are close to the upper limit of the scale (5.00), which indicates that most participants engage well in intercultural interactions. The standard deviation of 0.670 shows a moderate spread in the data. Although most teachers score similarly, there are some differences in their levels of engagement with intercultural interactions. Range (Min = 2.00, Max = 5.00). The range suggests that while most teachers demonstrate high engagement, a few score significantly lower, potentially reflecting varying levels of intercultural sensitivity among the participants.

Table 1:*Interaction Engagement*

Descriptives

	Interaction_engagement
N	39
Missing	0
Mean	4.25
Median	4.33
Standard deviation	0.670
Minimum	2.00
Maximum	5.00

The jittered data in Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the distribution of individual scores, showing how participants' engagement levels cluster. Given the relatively high mean, most points appear toward the higher end of the scale (closer to 5.00).

Figure 1: *Interaction Engagement (Jittered Data)*

In summary, the data suggest that Moroccan in-service EFL teachers generally report high levels of intercultural sensitivity in the dimension of interaction engagement alongside some variation among individuals.

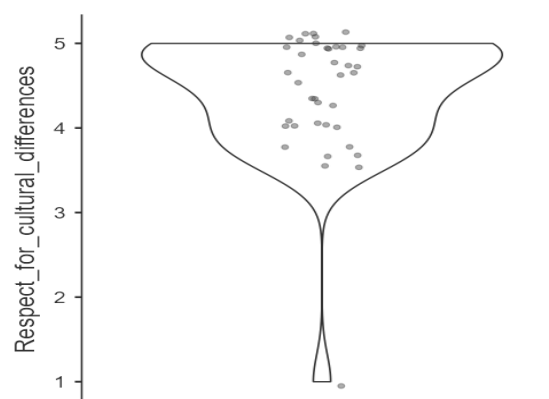### Dimension 2: Respect for Cultural Differences

The Respect for Cultural Differences dimension among 39 Moroccan in-service EFL teachers, as shown in Table 2, reflects a high average level of respect. The mean score is 4.41, with a median of 4.67, indicating that the majority of teachers exhibit strong respect for cultural differences. The standard deviation of 0.755 shows some variation, with scores ranging from 1.00 to 5.00. Notably, most participants score highly. Only a small number of teachers report lower levels of respect.

Table 2: *Respect for Cultural Differences*

Descriptives

	Respect_for_cultural_differences
N	39
Missing	0
Mean	4.41
Median	4.67
Standard deviation	0.755
Minimum	1.00
Maximum	5.00

Figure 2 jittered data illustrates this spread. Clearly seen, most scores concentrated near the higher end of the scale.

Figure 2: *Respect for Cultural Differences (Jittered Data)*

In brief, the data suggest a strong but varied respect for cultural differences among the group.

b) Dimension 3: Interaction Confidence

The Interaction Confidence dimension among 39 Moroccan in-service EFL teachers, as shown in Table 3, indicates a generally high level of confidence in intercultural interactions. The mean score is 4.17, and the median is 4.33, suggesting most teachers report a strong sense of confidence when engaging in intercultural interactions. The standard deviation of 0.705 suggests a moderate variation in confidence levels among participants. The scores range from
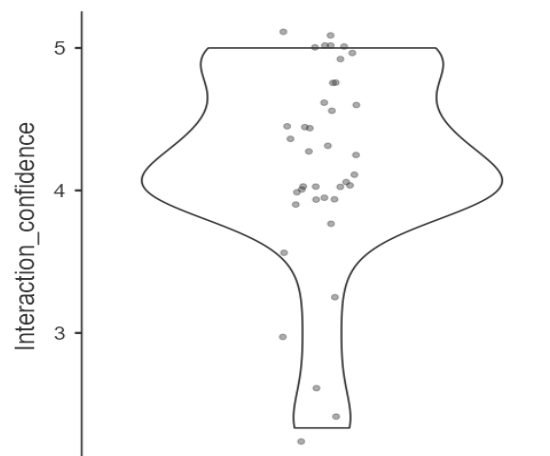
2.33 to 5.00, indicating that while the majority of teachers feel confident (with many scoring near the maximum), a few report lower levels of confidence.

Table 3: *Interaction Confidence*

Descriptives

	Interaction confidence
N	39
Missing	0
Mean	4.17
Median	4.33
Standard deviation	0.705
Minimum	2.33
Maximum	5.00

Figure 3 jittered data visualizes this distribution. Markedly, most teachers' scores clustering toward the higher end, but some outliers at the lower end.

Figure 3: *Interaction Confidence (Jittered Data)*

Altogether, the data suggest that Moroccan in-service EFL teachers generally exhibit high interaction confidence though there is some variation across the group.

c) **Dimension 4: Interaction Enjoyment**

The Interaction Enjoyment dimension among 39 Moroccan in-service EFL teachers, as shown in the table, indicates a generally positive attitude toward intercultural interactions. The mean score of 4.43 and a median of 4.67 suggest that most teachers enjoy interacting across cultures, with many scoring near the top of the scale. However, the standard deviation of 0.823 shows a moderate level of variation in enjoyment levels. Scores range from 1.00 to 5.00, indicating that the majority of teachers report high enjoyment in contrast with a few who experience significantly lower levels.

Table 4: *Interaction Enjoyment*

Descriptives	
	Interaction_enjoyment
N	39
Missing	0
Mean	4.43
Median	4.67
Standard deviation	0.823
Minimum	1.00
Maximum	5.00

Figure 4 jittered data reflects this spread, showing a concentration of high scores beside a few outliers toward the lower end.

Figure 4: *Interaction Enjoyment (Jittered Data)*

Taking everything in account, the data suggest that most Moroccan in-service EFL teachers enjoy intercultural interactions. Remarkably, some notable differences among individuals are to be considered.

d) Dimension 5: Interaction Attentiveness

The Interaction Attentiveness dimension among 39 Moroccan in-service EFL teachers shows a moderate level of attentiveness in intercultural interactions (a mean score of 3.38 and a median of 3.33 were observed). The standard deviation of 0.894 indicates a relatively high variation, meaning that attentiveness levels differ significantly across participants. Scores range from 1.33 to 5.00, suggesting that some teachers are highly attentive during intercultural interactions.
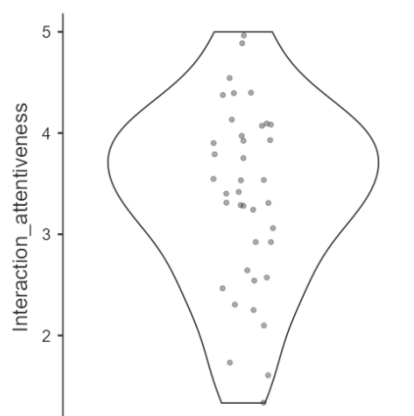
Table 5:*Interaction Attentiveness*

Descriptives

	Interaction_attentiveness
N	39
Missing	0
Mean	3.38
Median	3.33
Standard deviation	0.894
Minimum	1.33
Maximum	5.00

Figure 5 shows this broad distribution of participants spread across the scale.

Figure 5

Interaction Attentiveness (Jittered Data)

On the whole, the data suggest that attentiveness in intercultural interactions varies widely among this group of teachers.

To sum up, Moroccan in-service EFL teachers demonstrate a generally high level of intercultural sensitivity. Across all five dimensions measured (**interaction engagement**, **respect for cultural differences**, **interaction confidence**, **interaction enjoyment**, **and interaction attentiveness**), the average scores fall above the midpoint of the scale. This indicates that, on average, these teachers exhibit strong engagement in intercultural interactions, respect for cultural differences, confidence in their ability to interact across cultures, enjoyment of intercultural interactions, and a moderate level of attentiveness during such interactions. Conversely, it is important to note that there is variation within the group, with some individuals scoring significantly higher or lower than the average. This suggests that

the overall level of intercultural sensitivity is positive. Areas for further development and support for individual teachers with low levels are much needed.

4.1.2. Individual background influence intercultural sensitivity levels
a. Total Sensitivity and Gender

The influence of gender on intercultural sensitivity levels among Moroccan in-service EFL teachers is inconclusive. The independent samples t-test suggests a slight difference in total sensitivity scores between male and female teachers (p=0.068).This difference is not statistically significant (Table 6). This means that we cannot confidently conclude that gender plays a significant role in determining intercultural sensitivity levels in this sample. Although there is a small mean difference (-0.274), the effect size (Cohen's d = -0.627) is considered moderate, indicating that gender contributes to some degree of variability in intercultural sensitivity.
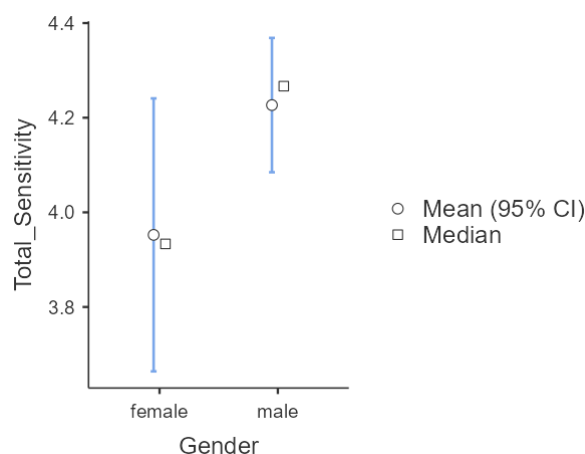
Table 6: *Independent Samples T-Test*

		Statistic	df	p	Mean difference	SE difference		Effect Size	95% Confidence Interval	
									Lower	Upper
Total_Sensitivity	Student's t	-1.88	37.0	0.068	-0.274	0.146	Cohen's d	-0.627	-1.29	0.0469

Note. H_a μ female ≠ μ male

Still, the wide confidence interval (-1.29 to 0.0469) implies that further investigation with a larger sample size is needed to determine the true impact of gender on intercultural sensitivity levels.

Figure 6:*Total Sensitivity across Gender*

By and large, there is a tendency towards a potential difference. Yet, the current data does not provide enough evidence to establish a clear relationship between gender and intercultural sensitivity in this group of Moroccan EFL teachers.

b. Total Sensitivity and Age

The Model Fit Measures in Table 7 indicate a weak relationship between the predictor variables and total intercultural sensitivity. The R value of 0.108 shows a very small positive correlation. The R² value of 0.0117 suggests that only 1.17% of the variance in total sensitivity

is explained by the model, indicating poor model fit. In Table 8, the Model Coefficients show that age has minimal impact on total intercultural sensitivity. The estimates for both age groups (35-45 and 46 and older) compared to the reference group (24-34) are small and negative (Estimate = -0.1104 and -0.0858, respectively). The associated p-values (0.532 and 0.653) indicate that these differences are not statistically significant (Table 7). This suggests that age does not significantly influence total intercultural sensitivity in this sample of 39 participants.

Table 7: _Model Fit Measures_

Model	R	R²
1	0.108	0.0117

Note. Models estimated using sample size of N=39

Table 8: _Model Coefficients - Total_Sensitivity_

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept [a]	4.1949	0.128	32.761	< .001
Age:				
35-45 – 24-34	-0.1104	0.175	-0.631	0.532
46 and older – 24-34	-0.0858	0.189	-0.454	0.653

[a] Represents reference level

All in all, the model provides little explanatory power for sensitivity based on age.

c. Total Sensitivity and Educational Level

For Total Sensitivity and Educational Level, Table 9 presents the Model Fit Measures, indicating a weak relationship between educational level and total intercultural sensitivity. The R value of 0.224 shows a small positive correlation. The R² value of 0.0501 suggests that only 5.01% of the variance in total sensitivity is explained by educational level. This indicates a modest improvement in model fit compared to previous models, but still a weak overall explanation. Table 10 presents the Model Coefficients. The intercept value of 4.0974 (p < .001) represents the baseline total sensitivity score for those with a BA degree. Comparisons between educational levels show that having an MA results in a slight decrease in sensitivity (Estimate = -0.0308), and having a doctorate increases sensitivity (Estimate = 0.2892), though neither effect is statistically significant (p = 0.867 for MA, p = 0.199 for Doctorate).

Table 9: *Model Fit Measures*

Model	R	R²
1	0.224	0.0501

Note. Models estimated using sample size of N=39

Table 10: *Model Coefficients - Total_Sensitivity*

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept [a]	4.0974	0.0888	46.162	< .001
Educationallevel:				
MA – BA	-0.0308	0.1830	-0.168	0.867
Doctorate – BA	0.2892	0.2210	1.309	0.199

[a] Represents reference level

This suggests that educational level has little to no significant influence on total intercultural sensitivity in this sample.

d. Total sensitivity and Teaching Experience by Years

In the analysis of Total Sensitivity and Teaching Experience by Years, Table 11 presents the Model Fit Measures, indicating a moderate relationship between teaching experience and total intercultural sensitivity. The R value of 0.381 suggests a moderate positive correlation. The R² value of 0.145 indicates that approximately 14.5% of the variance in total sensitivity explained by teaching experience, which represents a notable improvement over previous models. Table 12 details the Model Coefficients, with an intercept of 4.313 (p < .001) signifying the baseline sensitivity score for teachers with 1-5 years of experience. The coefficient for the comparison between the 6-12 years and 1-5 years group shows a significant negative estimate of -0.419 (p = 0.031), indicating that teachers with 6-12 years of experience report lower total sensitivity compared to those with 1-5 years. In contrast, the coefficients for the 13-26 years (Estimate = -0.104, p = 0.561) and 27 and over (Estimate = -0.313, p = 0.359) groups do not demonstrate statistical significance.

Table 11: *Model Fit Measures*

Model	R	R²
1	0.381	0.145

Note. Models estimated using sample size of N=39

Table 12: *Model Coefficients - Total_Sensitivity*

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept [a]	4.313	0.138	31.329	< .001
Number of teaching years:				
6-12 – 1-5	-0.419	0.186	-2.247	0.031
13-26 – 1-5	-0.104	0.178	-0.588	0.561
27 and over – 1-5	-0.313	0.337	-0.929	0.359

[a] Represents reference level

Broadly speaking, the results suggest that teaching experience plays a role in total intercultural sensitivity, particularly for those in the 6-12 year range. Longer experience does not significantly impact sensitivity levels.

e. Cultural Exposure and Intercultural Sensitivity

In the examination of Cultural Exposure and Intercultural Sensitivity, Table 13 presents the Model Fit Measures, indicating a weak relationship between prior cultural exposure and total intercultural sensitivity. The R value of 0.226 signifies a small positive correlation, while the R^2 value of 0.0513 indicates that only 5.13% of the variance in total sensitivity is explained by cultural exposure, suggesting limited explanatory power. Table 14 outlines the Model Coefficients, where the intercept is 4.243 (p < .001), representing the baseline sensitivity score for individuals who have not lived in a different culture. The comparison between those who have lived in a different culture ("Yes") and those who have not ("No") yields an estimate of -0.204 (p = 0.166), indicating a slight decrease in sensitivity for those with prior cultural exposure. However, this effect is not statistically significant.

Table 13: *Model Fit Measures*

Model	R	R^2
1	0.226	0.0513

Note. Models estimated using sample size of N=39

Table 14: *Model Coefficients – Total Sensitivity*

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept [a]	4.243	0.108	39.21	< .001
Ihavelivedinadifferentculturebefore:				
No – Yes	-0.204	0.144	-1.41	0.166

[a] Represents reference level

In the grand scheme, the results suggest that prior cultural exposure does not have a meaningful impact on total intercultural sensitivity in this sample, as evidenced by the weak model fit and lack of significant coefficients.

5. DISCUSSION

This study explored intercultural sensitivity (ICS) among Moroccan in-service EFL teachers, revealing a generally high level of sensitivity. The average score of 61.63 out of 75 on the ISS-15 scale aligns with previous research highlighting elevated ICS in language teachers globally (Fritz et al., 2001; Mostafaei Alaei & Nosrati, 2018; Segura-Robles & Parra-González, 2019). This could be attributed to factors like the inherent influence of foreign language learning on cultural awareness, the potential for pre-service training programs to underline intercultural understanding, and the potential for teaching experience and cross-cultural exposure to enhance sensitivity (Byram, 2020; Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017). Individual factors like openness, travel experience, bilingualism, and multicultural friendships can also play a role. Analyzing mean scores across three levels (Top, Middle, And Lower) indicated that EFL teachers are open-minded, respectful, and engaged in intercultural interactions, aligning with Bennett's "ethno-relative" stage of intercultural sensitivity. Top scorers reported high levels of interaction enjoyment, respect for cultural differences, and interaction engagement, which echoes findings in Turkey and Morocco (Boudouaia et al., 2022; Chami, 2022; Echcharfy, 2022; Elboubekri, 2017; Hamadouch & Aoumeur, 2023; Kerouad & Fatmi, 2024). Teachers felt moderately confident in interacting with diverse cultures, potentially influenced by bilingualism in contrast with attentiveness to subtle cues and meanings, which ranked lowest.

To recapitulate, all five dimensions of the ISS (Interaction Engagement, Respect for Cultural Differences, Confidence, Enjoyment, and Attentiveness) showed positive correlations with overall ICS, which lay emphasis on their significance in successful interactions. Interaction engagement had the strongest association, followed by confidence and enjoyment, confirming their importance in open-mindedness and understanding(AKYILDIZ & AHMED, 2020; Arcagok & Yılmaz, 2020; BAL, 2020; Hapsari, 2021).In relation to Gender and ICS, the study found no statistically significant differences in ICS scores between male and female teachers (p = 0.67), aligning with previous research (Adili & Xhambazi, 2021; Bujar & Gzim, 2021; Margarethe et al., 2012). This suggests that shared motivations, the impact of training programs, and technological influences might be minimizing gender differences in exposure to intercultural understanding. While some studies suggest specific gender tendencies, the inconsistency across research highlights the limited role of biology in determining ICS. Personality, personal experiences, and openness to cultural differences likely play a larger role. With reference to Age and Intercultural Sensitivity, Contrary to some expectations, the study found no significant influence of age on EFL teachers' intercultural sensitivity. This stands in stark contrast with existing literature (Boudouaia et al., 2022; Gedik Bal, 2023; Hapsari, 2021; Kim & Connelly, 2019; Segura-Robles & Parra-González, 2019; Tabatadze & Gorgadze, 2014). This could be explained by the specificity of the subject and the potential for globalization in the digital age to blur the lines of age-related sensitivity development. With regards to Education Level and Intercultural Sensitivity, the study revealed no statistically significant differences (p = 0.210), aligning with earlier studies (Altan, 2018; Chocce, 2014; Leutwyler et al., 2014). This suggests that factors beyond formal education, such as personal experiences, individual personality, or exposure to diverse cultures, might play a bigger role in

shaping intercultural sensitivity. The ready availability of information about different cultures in today's interconnected world might be diminishing the role of formal education in shaping intercultural understanding. Taking everything into account, Moroccan EFL teachers demonstrate a high level of intercultural sensitivity. the study highlights the importance of tailored professional development programs to address individual needs and challenges associated with a small minority with low levels.

6. IMPLICATIONS

The results underscore the significance of developing all five dimensions of ISS in EFL teachers. *Active engagement, confidence,* and *enjoyment in intercultural interactions* demonstrably improve student engagement and learning outcomes. Moreover, respect for cultural diversity strengthens inclusive classrooms and equips students for a globalized world. Although attentiveness showed a weaker correlation with overall sensitivity, its contribution to empathy and adaptation remains valuable. The observed high levels of intercultural sensitivity among EFL teachers might be attributed to the positive influence of university courses and in-service training programs in cultivating cultural awareness and sensitivity. Furthermore, the high self-reported sensitivity may reflect a potential alignment with the open and diverse character of Moroccan society, characterized by its multilingualism, multi-ethnicity, and multiculturalism. Nonetheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that these results are based on self-reported perceptions and lack direct assessment of intercultural communicative competence (ICC), the actual ability to effectively communicate across cultures.

7. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

The study results are limited by several factors that necessitate caution when drawing broader conclusions. First, the small and non-random sample size restricts the generalizability of the results to the wider Moroccan EFL community. A larger, more representative sample would be required to draw robust inferences about the population of Moroccan EFL teachers. Second, the reliance on quantitative methods alone limits the depth of analysis. Engaging in a mixed-methods approach, which presumably incorporates qualitative techniques alongside quantitative methods, would provide richer insights into teachers' self-perceptions and the underlying reasons for their beliefs. Third, the use of the Abridged ISS instrument raises concerns about the potential for socially desirable responses and the instrument's applicability to the Moroccan context. The instrument factorial structure may require adaptation or further investigation to ensure its appropriateness for the target population. A locally validated version of the instrument could boost the study validity. Last but not least, the data collection method, relying on electronic surveys, may have led to lower participation rates and limited reach. A paper-based, on-site data collection approach could have potentially improved coverage and data representativeness, although considerations regarding respondent comfort should be addressed.

7.1. Recommendations For Further Research

Future research on intercultural sensitivity among Moroccan EFL teachers could benefit from several key improvements. For a start, expanding the sample size to include a larger and more representative group of teachers would improve the generalizability of results. Similarly, employing a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data with qualitative methods like interviews or observations, would provide deeper insights into teachers' perceptions and the factors influencing them. Along the same lines, validating the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale

(ISS) within the Moroccan context is crucial to ascertain its accuracy and reliability in this specific cultural setting. Irrevocably, exploring additional or combined scales for measuring intercultural sensitivity could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the construct and would potentially reveal different facets of intercultural sensitivity and contributing to a more robust analysis.

8. CONCLUSION

This study revealed high levels of intercultural sensitivity among Moroccan EFL teachers in the provincial directorate of national education in Ifrane, Fes-Meknes Regional Academy. University courses, professional development training programs, and personal learning may have likely contributed to this. Analysis of the five ISS dimensions showed that teachers enjoy interacting with diverse cultures and engage actively, with respect and openness being key drivers. Attentiveness ranked lower, potentially due to its complexity. The positive correlations among dimensions suggest a strong, interrelated structure of intercultural sensitivity. The current results support previous studies which demonstrate high sensitivity among EFL teachers. Commonly, this study ventured to shed light on the Moroccan EFL context and contributes to bridging the research gap in this area. Future research should probe into factors, which influence sensitivity and employ objective measures to provide a more complete picture of teachers' intercultural sensitivity skills.

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