

## Intercultural Communicative Competence and the Moroccan Sense of Belonging: A Comparative Study

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### Abstract

*In any teaching context, two significant variables to examine are students' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and their sense of belonging (SOB). Despite the many research attempts that have tackled these two variables separately, they have rarely been combined in one single study, especially in the Moroccan context. Following this aim, the current study investigated the relationship between the two previous variables among the students of two master programs: Applied Language Studies (ALS) running at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences in Meknes, and Religious Diplomacy (RD) at the faculty of Chariaa in Fez. To collect data, two different tests were adopted: the first test assessed the participants' intercultural communicative competence, while the second measured their Moroccan sense of belonging. To compare the two groups of respondents, the scores obtained from the two tests were analyzed using, in addition to a mean comparison t-test, Pearson's test of correlation. The results revealed an average level of ICC and SOB, along with a significant correlation between the two key variables for both the ALS and RD cohorts.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

There has been much talk in the literature about the two concepts of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and sense of belonging (SOB). Despite the complex nature of the term ICC, a huge bulk of related research has been conducted worldwide across different contexts. This great interest in investigating ICC results from the actual mode of life, which entails much intercultural communication. The most influential and famous work on ICC is attributed to Byram (1997), assuming that ICC enables people to interact effectively with the multicultural reality utilizing five main qualities. With these at one's disposal, successful communication with people from different cultural backgrounds is surely guaranteed.

Similarly, a sense of belonging has also been examined among distinct populations, including teenagers, adults, migrants, refugees, ethnic groups, along war survivors. In addition, SOB has been tackled across various fields, such as mental and community health, education

systems, employment places, armed forces, etc. Historically, a sense of belonging is used to denote whether a person feels accepted and recognized by the other group members (Anant, 1967). Later on, a sense of belonging was perceived as how an individual thinks about a given place (Seamon, 1979). Today, a sense of belonging refers to one's experience of involvement within a given environment (Smith, 2011). However, there is evidence that having social relationships does not necessarily mean having a sense of belonging. In sum, as Levett-Jones and Lathlean (2009) assert, SOB is simply the feeling of security, acceptance, involvement, importance, respect, connectedness, and harmony concerning a particular group or culture.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Intercultural communicative competence (ICC)

#### 2.1.1. Definition

Due to the complex nature of the term Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), a wide range of definitions, models and assessment tools have been developed. In this respect, Fantini (2007) has listed several related terms that are employed in the literature to describe ICC. These encompass intercultural communicative competence, intercultural sensitivity, cross-cultural awareness, ethno-relativity, and global competencies, which all imply the same ability to allow an individual to go beyond his/her own culture and to deal with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Fantini, 2007).

Sercu (2006) defines ICC as the ability of foreign language learners to deal with intercultural experiences. Byram (1997) emphasizes that ICC entails understanding and relating to people from other countries, believing that successful communication is achieved when interlocutors “establish and maintain relationships” (p. 3). Advocating an ethno-relative perspective, Bennet (1993) developed his Intercultural Sensitivity (IS) to describe learners' ability to effectively respond to cultural differences and complexities.

#### 2.1.2. Byram's model of ICC

Byram's model of ICC (1997) highlights the qualities of a competent intercultural speaker. In general terms, these qualities include a set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The first element in Byram's model, *savoir*, refers to the intercultural speaker's knowledge of the social products and practices of his/her own and other cultures, including the underlying patterns of societal and individual interaction. Byram (1997) includes as the second component of his model the *savoir être*, which denotes the attitudes of intercultural speakers towards the beliefs of both their own culture and those of others. This means “relativizing self” and “valuing others” (Hoff, 2020).

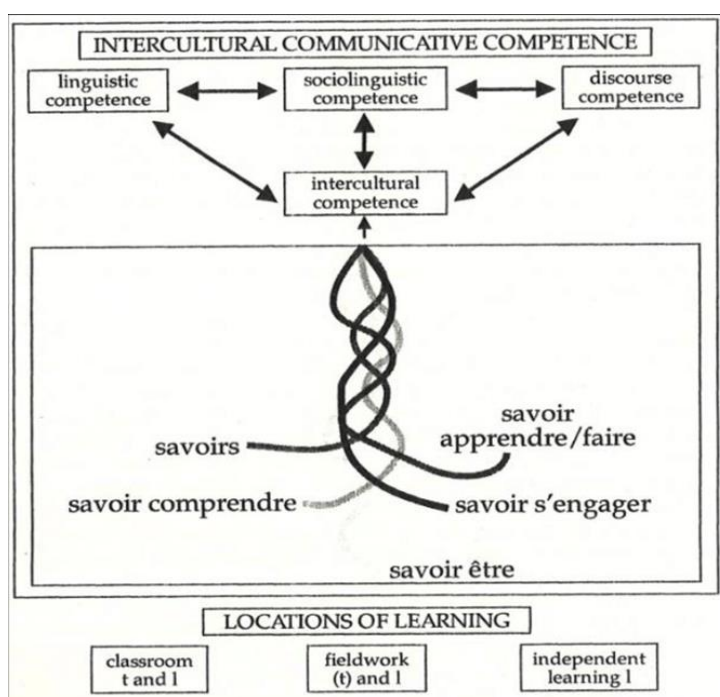
The third quality of competent intercultural speakers entails mastering the skills of interpreting documents/events from different cultures and relating them to one's own (*savoir comprendre*). *Savoir apprendre/faire* is the fourth element in Byram's model, which involves the skills of discovering and/or interacting. Put simply, this implies intercultural speakers' ability to engage in real-time communication relying on the aforementioned knowledge, attitudes, and skills. The last ability, *savoir s'engager*, comprises the critical evaluation of one's beliefs, practices, and products of their own and other cultures. Overall, Byram's model (1997) comprises five interconnected abilities with a reference to three main locations where ICC is acquired (classroom, fieldwork, and independent learning). Each location has different learning objectives as well as specific roles of teachers and learners (see **Figure 1**).

Byram's work (1997) is the most influential model of ICC in the context of foreign language education. Baumann (2009, p. 2) asserts that “there is evidence in the literature that this framework has been used successfully in different contexts”. For example, Feng and Fleming (2009) assessed intercultural competence among Asian students before they moved to study at a British university. This study was part of the SAILSA project (Self-Assessment of

***Intercultural Communicative Competence and the Moroccan Sense of Belonging: A Comparative Study***  
 IC for Living and Studying Abroad) and aimed to develop an integrated model for assessment (Baumann, 2009).

Moreover, Byram's model was also adopted to assess employees' ICC in Europe as a basis for the Intercultural Competence Assessment Project (INCA). This latter was developed based on six components (namely, empathy, respect for otherness, knowledge discovery, communicative awareness, tolerance of ambiguity, and behavioral flexibility), and three levels (basic, intermediate, and full). Mixed assessment tools were used in this project, including questionnaires, role plays, and portfolios (Precht & Davidson-Lund, 2007).

Furthermore, Byram's model informed also the LOLIPOP project that was intended to enhance learner autonomy and self-assessment of language and intercultural communication in the European context of higher education. Byram (2009) himself asserted that both the LOLIPOP and INCA projects are two European projects that have provided effective ways to assess learners' intercultural competence.



**Figure 1:** Model of ICC (Byram, 1997, p. 73)

## 2.2. Sense of Belonging (SOB)

### 2.2.1. Definition

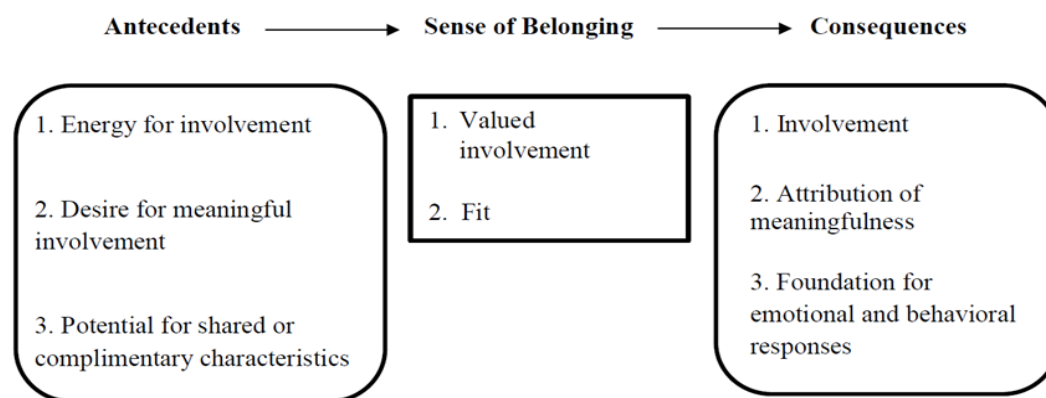
The term "Sense of Belonging" (SOB) has been defined differently by various researchers and specialists. Psychologists believe that belonging is necessary to an individual's mental health, for it relates to his/her experience of being important, accepted, and compatible within a system or environment (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995). Sociologists, on the other hand, conceive it as a fundamental value that links between self and society, resulting in "a sense of ease with oneself and one's surroundings" (May, 2011). According to Levett-Jones and Lathlean (2009), belonging is one's feeling of security, acceptance, involvement, importance, respect, connectedness, and harmony about a particular group. This doesn't mean that once a person has social relationships, he automatically has a sense of belonging (Lambert, Stillman, Hicks, Kamble, Baumeister, & Fincham, 2013). Many people don't feel they are part of the society where they live. In this sense, belonging entails aspects of both identity and community.

The majority of definitions assigned to the term belonging display almost the same meaning. This latter is often related to the person's perception of his/her relationship with a group. Terms like importance, connectedness, respect, perceived cohesion, and harmony with the group characterized most of those definitions (Mahar, Cobigo & Stuart, 2012). Maslow's hierarchy of needs (HON) is a common reference in the literature displaying the original definition associated with the sense of belonging. Although cultures emphasize belonging distinctively, it is still viewed as universal across cultures (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995). The need to belong differs among individuals, informing thus their behaviors. Crotty (1998) asserts that the sense of belonging is a state of being that can change over time.

### 2.2.2. Theoretical Model of Sense of Belonging

The first attempts to describe the sense of belonging were narrative by nature (Tovar & Simon, 2010). These had been associated with a lack of reliable and valid instruments, alongside issues related to sampling (Smith, 2011). As a result, Hagerty and Patusky (1995) developed their influential theoretical model (see **Figure 2**) drawing on antecedents and consequences. In this model, antecedents refer to the requirements for the development of a sense of belonging, while consequences are simply the results of having a sense of belonging (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995). In a particular environment, a sense of belonging has two major indicators: valued involvement and fit. The former reveals the person's experience of feeling accepted, valued, and significant, while the second implies the perception that they relate to or complement others (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995).

Regarding antecedents, the person must have energy for involvement, interest for meaningful involvement, and potential for shared or complementary characteristics with their environment. If these are present, individuals will automatically feel valued, needed, and important within their environment. The consequences, on the other hand, comprise in addition to different aspects of involvement (e.g., physical, psychological, spiritual, and social), the attribution of meaningfulness to that involvement, and the foundation for behavioral and emotional responses (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995).



**Figure 2:** *Sense of Belonging Theoretical Model (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995)*

Hagerty and Patusky's theoretical model (1995) resulted in the development of the Sense of Belonging Instrument (SOBI). Even after the emergence of SOBI, interviews are still being used as a valid research method examining a sense of belonging (Smith, 2011). However, SOBI remains the most influential quantitative instrument to measure a sense of belonging, namely within large environments. This instrument encompasses items that were generated from different sources, including literature reviews, focus groups, and interviews (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995).

SOBI draws on two complementary scales; one is about the antecedents of a sense of belonging, whereas the other represents the psychological state of a sense of belonging focusing on the dimensions of valued involvement and fit. While many studies have emphasized students' sense of belonging, Hagerty and Patusk's work (1995) tackles a sense of belonging within a broader framework. Thus, SOBI is not restricted to the school environment but rather is used to measure a sense of belonging within the general community. For this reason, the SOBI has been described as a valid and reliable measure in a wide range of settings and with different target groups (Winter-Collins & McDaniel, 2000; Bailey & McLaren, 2005).

### **2.3. Identity Management Theory (IMT)**

Identity Management Theory (IMT) has been used to explain the development of cultural identity negotiation throughout one's interpersonal relationship with other members from different cultural backgrounds (Imahori & Cupach, 2005). IMT adheres then to the multiplicity of identities and focuses mainly on cultural identity. The result of cultural identity negotiation is relational identity, which arises from the interpersonal relationships of intercultural participants (Janík, 2017). In this sense, effective management of interpersonal relationships establishes successful negotiation of "mutually acceptable identities" (Imahori & Cupach, 2005). This involves using appropriate communicative strategies to validate the preferred self-images (i.e., positive face) of the participants, and to avoid face threats (i.e., negative face) (Imahori & Cupach, 2005; Scollon, Scollon & Jones, 2012).

When people participate in intercultural communication, namely in their first encounters, they usually ask others "Where are you from?". At this point, they tend to view "each other as members of their respective cultures and to ignore other aspects of each other's identity." (Imahori & Cupach, 2005, p. 199). This phenomenon is known as "identity freezing", implying individuals' inability to declare their preferred face (or cultural identity) that might be different from the one ascribed by others. As such, identity freezing forces people into predefined categories and threatens their identities, for it involves stereotyping (Janík, 2017). Consequently, IMT proposes some strategies to restore face in the case of identity freezing. These include educating others about the dangers of stereotyping, using similar stereotypes with the partner, accepting the stereotype as true, or just avoiding interaction about stereotypes. In short, identity freezing threatens self-image in intercultural communication and thus contributes to cultural identity salience.

Drawing on the principles of identity management theory (IMT), a clear relationship seems to exist between aspects of cultural identity, including a sense of belonging, and intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Exploring this interesting link is the major concern of the present study.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

Both the aim of the present study as well as the nature of the data collected indicated the adoption of a quantitative approach. Following the quantitative paradigm, this study attempted to analyze the relationship between students' intercultural communicative competence and their sense of belonging to Moroccan society. This relationship was verified by assessing first the key variables among the study participants and then applying some statistical tests to the numerical data obtained from the previous assessment. Moreover, the study incorporated a non-experimental correlational design, displaying no control over its two variables, and assuming no causal relationship between them. To collect data, the study used two different tests. While the first test assessed the participants' intercultural communicative competence (ICC), the second test measured their Moroccan sense of belonging (SOB).

### **3.1. Research context**



As mentioned before, the present study has investigated the relationship between intercultural communicative competence and the Moroccan sense of belonging, particularly among students of two different Moroccan master programs: Applied Language Studies (ALS) running at Moulay Ismail University in Meknes, and Religious Diplomacy (RD) at the Faculty of Chariaa in Fes.

### 3.2. Research Questions

The purpose of this study was mainly to investigate the relationship between intercultural communicative competence and the Moroccan sense of belonging among two groups of master students. To achieve this aim, the following questions were addressed:

- To what extent are the students of the two groups interculturally competent?
- How is their sense of belonging to the Moroccan society?
- Do students of the two groups have similar levels of intercultural communicative competence and a sense of belonging?
- Is there any relationship between these students' intercultural communicative competence and their Moroccan sense of belonging?

### 3.3. Instruments

#### 3.3.1. ICC Test

The ICC test was devised based on Byram's model (1997), as it is the most influential work on ICC in the literature. The model implies a rich description of ICC referring to the needs of interpersonal communication with people from different cultures. It also comprises aspects from various kinds of interaction, including telecommunications. Following Byram's work, the test encompassed five main sections: a) attitudes towards one's own and another culture; b) knowledge about one's own and other cultures; c) skills of interpreting and relating documents from different cultures; d) skills of discovery and interaction in regards to other cultures; and e) critical awareness of one's intercultural attitudes, knowledge and skills. The model is extremely precise being founded on pre-defined and quantifiable objectives in the sense that each section draws on some objectives, which serve as end-of-course aims.

#### 3.3.2. SOB Test

This test dealt with the second variable of the present study (i.e., the Moroccan sense of belonging). This test drew on the famous theoretical model of Hagerty and Patusky (1995), resulting in the development of a self-report measure (SOBI) divided into two sections: the psychological subscale (SOBI-P) with eighteen questions assessing the achieved degree of belonging in terms of valued involvement and environment fit, and the antecedent subscale (SOBI-A) with fifteen other questions measuring the desire and motivation to belong.

The SOB test is thus a 33-item measuring adults' sense of belonging concerning the large community. While assessing the validity, consistency, and reliability of the instrument through many studies among different samples, it was found that SOBI-P is a valid and reliable measure. As for SOBI-A, it seemed convenient in performing its fundamental role but still required additional studies to assess its construct validity and internal consistency (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995). SOBI was originally developed by drawing on a 4-point Likert scale for each item. Yet, to collect more accurate and precise data, two other options were added, namely "Slightly Agree" and "Slightly Disagree".

Overall, SOBI remains the most influential quantitative instrument to measure the sense of belonging, namely within large environments (Smith, 2011). Since it is not restricted to specific contexts and situations, it has been greatly used as a valid and reliable measure across

many settings and with distinct populations (Winter-Collins & McDaniel, 2000; Bailey & McLaren, 2005). Concerning the comparative dimension of the current study, the researcher designed two versions of the two tests: an English one for the master students of Applied Language Studies, which was translated then into Arabic to match the students of the Religious Diplomacy master's program.

### **3.4. Pre-collection Phase**

Before collecting the data from the respondents, a piloting phase was carried out. In this regard, the researcher administered the questionnaire to several BA students from both the English and Islamic departments to ensure that the participants from the two master programs would not find any difficulties with understanding the questions involved and the language used in the two tests. As a result, piloting the research instruments with lower-level students not only proved their understanding of the content but also enabled them to receive positive feedback about it.

### **3.5. Data Analysis**

After correcting the two tests manually, several descriptive statistics were applied to summarize and organize the obtained data. These comprised central tendency measures, including the mean, mode, and median for both groups, along with three other dispersion measures, precisely the range, variance, and standard deviation. All these statistical measures were calculated via SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences), revealing thus the organization of the participant's scores in the two tests. Additionally, a mean comparison t-test was also employed to compare the scores of the two groups and to determine if they have the same levels of intercultural communicative competence and sense of belonging, or not. The null hypothesis for this test considers the means of the two groups as equal, whereas the alternative hypothesis suggests they are significantly different from each other.

To verify the relationship between the two key variables, the study adopted a Pearson product-moment correlation (PPMC). This parametric test is characterized by its strong ability to detect the significance of association between two interval or ratio quantitative variables. The result of Pearson's correlation test is the coefficient "r" which normally gets a value between -1 and 1. A correlation coefficient of 1 indicates a perfect and positive relationship; a correlation coefficient of -1 suggests a perfect and negative association; and a correlation coefficient equal to 0 means no relationship. Therefore, the closer the coefficient "r" is to 1 or -1, the more significant the relationship. According to Cohen (1988), a correlation coefficient of 0.10 is interpreted as "small"; 0.30 is "medium" while 0.50 is "large" in terms of its effect and magnitude.

## **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.1. Comparing ICC among the Two Groups**

An important objective of this study is to compare the two involved groups based on the scores they obtained in the adopted tests. To achieve that, a mean comparison t-test was employed to identify whether the groups have the same ICC scores, or not. The mean is the average score vis-à-vis the whole group, and as **Table 1** below shows, it is different for the two groups, with 35,41 for the first group, and 31,64 for the second. The two means suggest that the ICC scores of the ALS group are above average, while those of the RD group are just average. As a result, it can be concluded that both groups have an average overall ICC.

Moreover, though the range value is the same for the two groups (i.e., 24), it still reveals a significant variability. Similarly, both variance values are large for the two relevant means, implying also a high variability and dispersion in the ICC scores.

ICC. Group 1: ALS			ICC. Group 2: RD		
N	Valid	27	N	Valid	25
	Missing	0		Missing	2
Mean		35,41	Mean		31,64
Median		36,00	Median		32,00
Mode		31	Mode		33
Std. Deviation		5,686	Std. Deviation		6,137
Variance		32,328	Variance		37,657
Range		24	Range		24
Minimum		21	Minimum		17
Maximum		45	Maximum		41
Percentiles	25	31,00	Percentiles	25	27,50
	50	36,00		50	32,00
	75	40,00		75	36,50

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics of the ICC Scores for the Two Groups

#### 4.2. Comparing SOB among the Two Groups

Similarly, the same method (mean comparison t-test) was again adopted to find out whether the two groups had the same SOB scores, or not. **Table 2** reveals the mean values of each group, with 145,30 for ALS and 143,72 for RD. These values support the claim that students from the ALS group possess a greater sense of belonging to Moroccan society than their peers from the RD group. In short, the results of the SOB subscales display a positive sense of belonging, along with a desire to belong for both groups, with the ALS group possessing higher levels.

In addition, the range values are this time varied between the two groups, while the variances are still large concerning their pertinent means. Thus, as in the case of ICC, there is again a high variability and dispersion in the SOB scores. Accordingly, students from the ALS group have been found to possess higher ICC and a better sense of belonging compared to their peers from the RD group.

SOB. Group 1: ALS		
N	Valid	27
	Missing	0
Mean		145,30
Median		143,00
Mode		132



<b>Std. Deviation</b>	18,106	<b>SOB. Group 2: RD</b>		
<b>Variance</b>	327,832	<b>N</b>	Valid	25
<b>Range</b>	75		Missing	2
<b>Minimum</b>	105	<b>Mean</b>	143,72	
<b>Maximum</b>	180	<b>Median</b>	146,00	
<b>Percentiles</b>	25	<b>Mode</b>	146	
	50	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	19,637	
	75	<b>Variance</b>	385,627	
		<b>Range</b>	86	
		<b>Minimum</b>	92	
		<b>Maximum</b>	178	
		<b>Percentiles</b>	25	133,50
			50	146,00
			75	158,50

**Table 2.** *Descriptive Statistics of the SOB Scores for the Two Groups*

#### 4.3. The Relationship between ICC and SOB

Another significant objective of the current study is to verify the relationship between intercultural communicative competence (as the independent variable) and the Moroccan sense of belonging (as the dependent variable). This verification is conducted based on the scores they obtained in the two adopted tests. A Pearson's test of correlation is utilized here to find out whether there is any link between the two key variables of this study. **Table 3** displays that the correlation coefficient for the ALS group  $r_1 = 0,216$ . This value is a bit above 0 and thus suggests a significant correlation between the two variables, but its magnitude is still small according to Cohen (1988).

		<b>ICC.ALS</b>	<b>SOB.ALS</b>
<b>ICC.ALS</b>	Pearson Correlation	1	,216
	Sig. (1-tailed)		,140
	N	27	27
<b>SOB.ALS</b>	Pearson Correlation	,216	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	,140	
	N	27	27

**Table 3.** *The Correlation Test between ICC and SOB for the ALS Group*

Regarding the RD group, **Table 4** also indicates the existence of an association between the two key variables of the study. The coefficient here  $r_2 = 0,390^*$  implying that the correlation is significant at the 0,05 level, with a medium magnitude this time. Therefore, the

adopted Pearson's correlation test reveals a significant correlation between the two variables for both groups, with a better coefficient and magnitude for the RD group.

		ICC.R D	SOB.RD
ICC.R D	Pearson Correlation	1	,390*
	Sig. (1-tailed)		,027
	N	25	25
SOB.R D	Pearson Correlation	,390*	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	,027	
	N	25	25
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.			

**Table 4.** *The Correlation Test between ICC and SOB for the RD Group*

#### 4.4. Discussion

The assessment of the participants' ICC drew on the five fundamental components of Byram's model (1997). These include attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical awareness. Under each of these elements, Byram (1997) lists several objectives that individuals need to achieve in their efforts to become competent intercultural speakers. Such competence, according to Byram, allows one to act appropriately and effectively across a wide range of intercultural encounters.

For this test, the participants from both groups demonstrated an average ICC level, which goes hand in hand with Lazrak (2016), who similarly investigated students' ICC in the same context among a similar population. Lazrak concluded that Moroccan EFL university students do have the necessary ICC, which not only keeps them aware of the Anglo-American culture but also reinforces their self-identity in cross-cultural mediation. This is in line with the orientation of Moroccan education towards the development of learners' cross-cultural competence, mainly through boosting their understanding of other cultures, and allowing them to share their cultural concerns. Therefore, it seems normal that most university students will possess an average sense of ICC after completing their K-12 schooling journey.

Additionally, while ALS students obtained better ICC scores than RD members, it may be argued that being part of the English Studies department has a positive impact on the development of ICC. This can be associated with the ALS program, which allocates a great deal of emphasis on cultural studies, with a strong focus on the English language as it is used in Anglo-Saxon countries, especially England and the USA.

The participants' scores in the SOB test have also revealed a positive sense of belonging to the Moroccan country for the two involved groups. This means that both ALS and RD students possess, in addition to an achieved degree of belonging, a significant desire and motivation to be part of Moroccan society. This test was adopted from Hagerty and Patusky (1995), and it is a self-report measure divided into two major sections: the psychological subscale (SOBI-P) assessing the achieved degree of belonging, and the antecedent subscale (SOBI-A) measuring the desire and motivation to belong.

These results can be attributed to Moroccan society, which is often described as more collectivistic than individualistic. Since Moroccans see themselves as interconnected with each other, they tend to maintain membership in the group and value the public spaces of their

country. Therefore, it seems normal that the study participants could achieve a positive sense of belonging towards Moroccan society.

Over and above, the Moroccan culture, which stands on originality and contemporaneity, has a positive impact on Moroccans' ICC and their SOB. Put simply, it has a combined heritage (Berber, Arab, and Jewish), along with a particular geographical placement (i.e., at the crossroads between Africa and Europe). Consequently, the components of the Moroccan culture reflect the diversity and uniqueness of different life facets. Noticing that Moroccan beliefs are highly related to the Islamic religion, which influences their norms and practices, food and cuisine, symbols and rituals, and so on, Moroccans are tolerant, broad-minded, and unbiased individuals.

Furthermore, Moroccans have been influenced by the coexistence of multiple cultures, social stability, cohesion, and a distinctive national identity, which are significant aspects of Moroccan social life. While almost all Moroccans are Muslims, they have always been living in perfect harmony with other religious minorities such as Jews, Christians, and Bahais. Accordingly, Moroccans typically value family, honor, and a calm disposition, given that family relationships are a determining factor of the norms and practices underlying Moroccan social life.

In addition, Morocco is also a multilingual country revealing its diversity and openness. As a result, Moroccans, especially students, are more likely to be exposed to a wide range of languages and dialects, including Moroccan Arabic, French, English, Spanish, Tamazight, Tichelhitt, Tarifit, and so on. This multilingual landscape has positively impacted and reinforced their Moroccan ICC and SO through using different languages while communicating with diverse social groups.

Moreover, the two groups were then compared based on the scores they got on the SOB test. The study revealed better SOB for ALS students than their RD peers. These results identify surprising links between students' SOB and their ICC. Such insights overlap greatly with the proposed theoretical framework for the current study, identity management theory. In the same vein, Koumachi (2015) alongside Lazrak (2016) have both found that having enough ICC boosted self-identity among Moroccan EFL university students, namely in cross-cultural exchanges. Hence, Moroccan students' sense of belonging, as part of their cultural identity, would normally increase when they are engaged in intercultural communication.

As far as the relationship between the two key variables, Pearson's test indicated a significant correlation for both groups, with a better coefficient and magnitude favoring the RD students. Even though these latter obtained lesser ICC and SOB scores, they have also shown more consistency and coherence than their ALS peers. In a nutshell, it could be deduced based on these outcomes that the more scattered the scores of the two tests, the less significant the correlation between the two variables.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The present study aimed to investigate the relationship between two key variables: intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and sense of belonging (SOB). In line with this aim, this study was carried out during the academic year 2022-2023 among two groups of Moroccan students from both the Applied Language Studies (ALS) and Religious Diplomacy (RD) master programs. These latter are running at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences in Meknes and the Faculty of Chariaa in Fez respectively, in Morocco. To collect data, two different tests were adopted: the first test assessed the respondents' ICC, while the second measured their SOB. The scores obtained from the two tests indicated that the participants of the two groups possessed a moderate level of both ICC and SOB, with better scores received

by the ALS cohort. In addition, a Pearson's test of correlation was conducted to verify the relationship between the two previous variables, asserting the existence of a significant correlation between students' ICC and their Moroccan sense of belonging. Drawing on the obtained results, the following recommendations are listed:

- Professors should raise students' awareness about the similarities and differences between distinct cultures.
- Professors, as gatekeepers in their classrooms, should also integrate more cultural and intercultural content in their attempts to develop students' intercultural knowledge, skills, attitudes, and critical awareness.
- Professors should continuously enhance and assess their students' ICC by engaging them in various intercultural communicative activities.
- Both professors and students should be aware of the multiple factors affecting the sense of belonging, with much emphasis on social and physical dimensions.
- The association between students' ICC and their SOB should be well exploited to establish successful teaching-learning experiences.

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