

Prioritizing Cross-cultural Competence in the 21st Century EFL Classroom: High School Teachers Perspectives and Pedagogical Practices

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Abstract

In today's interconnected world, cross-cultural competence is a core skill for an individual to be able to navigate diverse cultural landscapes and effectively communicate and collaborate in cross-cultural situations. This study aims to gain insights from High School teachers of English on their perspectives and practices in developing cross-cultural competence among students. It also aims to understand how teachers perceive the importance of these skills, the extent to which they prioritize them in their teaching, and the challenges they face in fostering cross-cultural understanding. For doing this, a mixed methods approach was used to explore teachers' perspectives, practices and challenges related to developing cross-cultural competence in their classrooms. The study examined 63 high school EFL teachers using a structured online survey with multiple-choice and open-ended questions as an instrument for data collection. The qualitative data were analyzed thematically; whereas the quantitative data were analyzed using the SPSS. Results show that participants view cross-cultural competence as relevant and important for students. The study also explored that understanding cultural differences and similarities is among the top skills teachers intend to develop through discussions and debates. The participants also declared that students' level and insufficient resources and materials are the main challenges they face in integrating cross-cultural competence in their teaching. Most importantly, it was revealed that teachers are in desperate need of training and textbook updating. These findings provide policymakers with valuable insights to ensure the integration of cross-cultural competence in today's EFL classes.

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized world, English language plays a pivotal role in facilitating communication and interaction between people from different parts of the world. It is spoken by millions of people around the world (Ardi & Iswandari, 2022). This status of English as lingua franca nowadays made the teaching of this language much more challenging for teachers. The challenge lies in the fact that developing students' knowledge of grammar and vocabulary cannot be enough to make them interact effectively with people from various cultures. Thus, enhancing cross-cultural competence can contribute effectively to raising a

student as an intercultural speaker or communicator (Byram, 2021).

Emphasizing cultural awareness in EFL classrooms is not a new issue, but rather it has been the concern of several researchers and educators for a long time. The National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project (1999) drew attention to the vital role of culture in language classrooms and considered it as a fundamental part of the second language learning process (Dema & Moeller, 2012). This significance, as mentioned earlier, grew with the vast and massive spread of technology and the internet.

In the Moroccan context, boosting cross-cultural competence is not restricted only to universities where special time is devoted to developing students' cultural awareness, skills and sensitivity through various courses. Yet, this concern begins earlier in high schools where students are supposed to meet the standards stated in the guidelines and which are summarized in the 5Cs (Hassim, et. al. 2006). One of these 5Cs is "Culture" which is demonstrated in students' understanding of their own culture and other cultures. Moreover, it is not just a matter of guidelines and standards of English language teaching in Morocco, promoting cross-cultural competence in high school EFL classrooms has become a necessity due to the fact that (1) high school students nowadays are digital natives and use technology to interact with people from different parts of the world; and (2) most of them, if not all, aim to pursue their higher education abroad. Thus, preparing students for effective and meaningful interactions in cross-cultural situations has to be the main concern of all EFL teachers (Baraslauskas, 2021).

In this respect, several studies were conducted to investigate students' level of intercultural communicative competence (Kerouad & Fatmi, 2024); others were done to investigate pre-service and in-service teachers' sensitivity and knowledge (Deardorff, 2006; Pierre, et. al, 2021; Sleeter, 2008; Salazar & Carballo, 2011; Haddaoui, et. al., 2024). However, there were no previous studies which investigated Moroccan high school teachers' perspectives, practices and challenges related to developing cross-cultural competence among students. Therefore, the current study is an attempt to address a critical gap in the literature regarding high school teachers' views on cross-cultural education, the key intercultural skills they intend to develop, and the common pedagogical practices they employ. Additionally, this study aims to offer recommendations for overcoming the challenges that teachers face in integrating cross-cultural competence in their EFL classrooms.

1.1. The Rationale

This study aims to investigate high school teachers' perspectives, practices and challenges regarding the incorporation of cross-cultural competence in their classrooms. Developing students' cross-cultural competence is significant for equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge to be able to navigate and interact effectively and appropriately in multicultural situations. In Moroccan high school EFL teaching, reaching this goal depends heavily on the teacher (Haddaoui, et. al., 2024; Braslauskas, 2021). Therefore, the results of the present study will inform educational authorities and policymakers about teachers' perspectives on integrating cross-cultural competence in their lessons, the pedagogical practices they employ and the main intercultural skills they intend to enhance. Not only this, the study will also offer recommendations for overcoming the obstacles that teachers face to enhance and facilitate the integration of cross-cultural competence among students in EFL teaching and learning contexts.

1.2. The Objectives of the Study

In today's interconnected world, learning about another culture is now one of the main objectives in a foreign language classroom (Dema, 2012). Thus, enhancing cross-cultural competence should be one of the main goals of a teacher for building interculturally competent students. Accordingly, this study aims to achieve the following objectives.

- 1) To examine high school teachers' perspectives on the importance of cross-cultural competence in language education.
- 2) To investigate the extent to which high school teachers prioritize cross-cultural competence in their classrooms.
- 3) To explore the strategies and pedagogical practices they use to foster cross-cultural competence in their classrooms.
- 4) To investigate the challenges high school teachers face in integrating cross-cultural competence in their teaching.

1.3. Research Questions

Equipping students with the necessary skills to be able to effectively and appropriately engage, integrate and communicate in cross-cultural contexts has become a must. However, it is not an easy task. Therefore, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

- 1) How do high school teachers view the incorporation of cross-cultural competence in language education?
- 2) What specific cross-cultural skills do teachers prioritize in their teaching?
- 3) What strategies and pedagogical practices do they use to foster cross-cultural competence in their classrooms?
- 4) What challenges do they face in integrating cross-cultural competence in their teaching?
- 5) How do the respondents' descriptions and suggestions help to explain the skills teachers prioritize, the strategies they employ and the challenges they face?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Culture and EFL teaching

A number of definitions of culture have emerged over the past 50 years. Social scientists view culture as closely related to human learning (Dema & Moeller, 2012). Despite hundreds of attempts to define culture, still researchers have not reached an agreed-upon definition. However, Seelye (1993) argued that culture is a very broad concept embracing all aspects of human life. Though this definition is broad, it gives us an idea about the nature of culture as a complex concept. It includes the characteristics and the way of life and thinking of a group of people, history, religion, tradition and norms as social habits and arts (Ardi & Iswandari, 2022). This broad definition shows that teaching culture is not an easy task.

Research has shown that language and culture are closely linked and one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture (Brown, 2007; Kramsch, 1998). Agar (1994) introduced "languaculture" to describe how language and culture interact when people communicate meaning (Haddaoui, et. al., 2024). Therefore, teaching a language should not be done in isolation from culture. In this respect, language teachers have recognized the need to incorporate more cultural activities in order to promote students' cultural and intercultural understanding (Dema & Moeller, 2012). According to the Standards in Foreign Language Education Project (1999), the true content of the foreign language course is not the grammar and vocabulary, but rather the cultures expressed through that language. This means that developing cultural and intercultural competence among students should be the main concern of a foreign language instructor.

2.2. Competence

Several definitions of the concept of “competence” exist in the literature across different fields such as psychology and education. Numerous scholars have contributed to making this concept understandable and measurable. The most famous definition was proposed by David McClelland (1973) who is known for his work on competency-based approaches. He argued that “competence” is a concept that encompasses the combination of knowledge, skills and behaviours necessary for effective performance in a specific context. He also argued that, unlike intelligence, competence is a better predictor of success in work and education (McClelland, 1973).

2.3. Cross-Cultural Competence

In today’s interconnected world, cross-cultural competence is highly demanded for successful interaction in multicultural situations. The ability to understand, serve and interact effectively and respectfully with people from various cultural backgrounds has been referred to by several scholars using different concepts such as cultural competence, multicultural competence, cross-cultural competence, multicultural competence and so forth (Goodman, 2020).

Moreover, The concept of cross-cultural competence has been defined by several scholars and researchers. Despite the various attempts to define cross-cultural competence, the debate about its components is still considerable (Ward, et. Al, 2013). A famous work by Chen and Starosta (2000) suggested that intercultural competence incorporates three related dimensions: *Sensitivity, awareness* and *skills*. Sensitivity refers to one’s ability to comprehend and appreciate cultural differences. Awareness is the ability to know how culture affects behaviour, thinking and interactions. Skills are linked to effective communication and intercultural interactions (Ward, et. al., 2013). Another attempt to uncover the main components of cross-cultural competence was reflected in a work by Deardorff (2006). Her research concluded that cross-cultural competence is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural *knowledge, skills* and *attitudes*. However, Deardorff (2006) noted that the knowledge and skills components of cross-cultural competence preceded by requisite attitudes including openness to, and respect for, other cultures (Ward, et. al., 2013).

2.4. The Significance of Cross-cultural Competence

EFL classes are a prime context for developing and enhancing cross-cultural competence among students for several reasons. First, in today’s *interconnected world* the ability to interact with, and understand, people from different cultures and identities is crucial for meaningful communication in intercultural situations (Oravova, 2023). Also, English nowadays is a *lingua franca*. It facilitates communication with people from different parts of the world. Therefore, being interculturally competent is significant in preparing students for effective communication across cultures (Ardi & Iswandari, 2022). Moreover, in this globalized world, the ability to work with, and serve, people in a wide variety of settings is one of the most important goals of enhancing cross-cultural competence (Ward, et. al., 2013). Last but not least, integrating cross-cultural competence in EFL classrooms is important for fostering *cultural sensitivity*. This is crucial for respecting cultural differences and preventing cultural misunderstanding. All these reasons are sufficient to urge EFL teachers to prioritize cross-cultural competence in their classroom practices.

2.5. The Teacher’s Role

In the process of EFL teaching, the instructor plays a pivotal role in promoting cross-cultural competence among learners. This role is affected by three major factors. The first one is *sensitivity*. Research in this field found that the level of intercultural sensitivity among EFL

teachers is significant for effective cultural teaching and preparing future generations for intercultural interactions (Haddaoui, et. al., 2024). Another factor affecting the teacher's role is *training*. According to Pierre, et. al., (2021), teacher education programs play a vital role in producing active culturally competent teachers. Their study revealed a positive impact of multicultural education courses on the cultural competence of the students (pre-service teachers). Finally, the teacher's role in promoting cross-cultural competence in EFL classes is reflected in their *pedagogical practices* (Chaouche, 2016). In other words, a teacher can employ various approaches to enhance students' intercultural skills and knowledge such as cultural awareness activities, discussions, critical incident analysis, project-based learning, role play, etc. These factors are predeterminers for effective and successful cross-cultural promotion in EFL classes.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study attempts to gain insights from Moroccan High School teachers of English on their perspectives, pedagogical practices and challenges they face in developing cross-cultural competence among students. To do this, the study adopts the mixed-methods approach. The adoption of this approach is grounded on the fact that it involves the combination and integration of qualitative and quantitative data to yield additional insight beyond the information gained by either of them (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.1. Research Design

Practically, the study opts for a **convergent mixed methods design**. This design provides a more comprehensive analysis of the research problem by merging both qualitative and quantitative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Apuke, 2017; Fischer, et. al., 2023). The rationale behind the choice of this design is that in this study we opt for gaining deep insights into how teacher's suggestions and descriptions (qualitative data) help to explain the teachers' perspectives and practices (quantitative data).

3.2. Data Collection

The data was collected through an online survey using the Likert scale to measure the respondents' perspectives on the importance and relevance of cross-cultural competence (Deardorff, 2006). The survey also contained demographic information (age, gender, teaching experience and training) as well as multiple-choice questions to gain insights into the teachers' pedagogical practices and challenges they face adapted from the work of Orazova (2023). The questionnaire also contained open-ended questions for obtaining qualitative data (the teachers' descriptions and suggestions).

3.3. Sample

The study targeted high school teachers of English in the Region of Fes-Mekens. More than 140 teachers were contacted to participate in the survey. Yet, 63 teachers responded and participated. The sample was selected through a purposive sampling method in order to gather rich and detailed insights into their experiences with, and perspectives on, the integration of cross-cultural competence in EFL classes.

3.4. Participants' Demographics

As mentioned above, 63 high school teachers of English with various backgrounds took part in this study. Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4 show the participants' distribution across various demographic backgrounds.

Table 1: Participants' gender

Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
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Valid	Male	41	65,1	65,1	65,1
	Female	22	34,9	34,9	100,0
	Total	63	100,0	100,0	

Table 1 shows that 41 participants (65,1%) were males, which accounts for a cumulative 65,1% of the total of the sample; whereas 22 participants (34,9) were females, accounting for a cumulative 100% of the total of the sample.

Table 2: Participants' Age

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	under 30	10	15,9	15,9	15,9
	30-39	41	65,1	65,1	81,0
	40-49	10	15,9	15,9	96,8
	50 or More	2	3,2	3,2	100,0
	Total	63	100,0	100,0	

For the age groups of participants, table 2 shows that the age group 30-39 made up the majority of participants (65,1%), accounting for a cumulative 81% of the total sample. 10 participants (15,9%) were under 30, which accounts for a cumulative 15,9% of the sample. Similarly, 10 participants aged between 40 and 49, made up a cumulative 96% of the whole sample. Whereas, 2 participants (3,2%) were 50 or more.

Table 3: Participants' Teaching Experience

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	less than 5 years	12	19,0	19,0	19,0
	5-10 years	35	55,6	55,6	74,6
	11-20 years	13	20,6	20,6	95,2
	More than 20 years	3	4,8	4,8	100,0
	Total	63	100,0	100,0	

For the teaching experience, table 3 shows that more than half of the participants (55,6%) reported having between 5 and 10 years of teaching experience, which accounts for a cumulative 74,6% of the total sample. 13 participants (20,6%) have 11-20 years of experience, making up a cumulative 95,2% of the total sample. Quite similarly, 12 participants (19%) indicated that they have less than 5 years of experience, accounting for a cumulative 19% of the total sample; whereas, only 3 participants (4,8%) have more than 20 years of teaching experience, with a cumulative 100% of the total of the sample.

Table 4: Participants' training on cross-cultural competence

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes, in university	22	34,9	34,9	34,9
	Yes, PD workshops	8	12,7	12,7	47,6
	No formal training	33	52,4	52,4	100,0

Total	63	100,0	100,0
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As for training on teaching cross-cultural competence, table 4 shows that more than half of the participants (52,4%) had no formal training in this field, which accounts for a cumulative 100% of the total sample. 22 participants (34,9%) noted that they had cross-cultural courses at universities, with a cumulative 34,9% of the total sample; whereas, only 8 participants (12,7%) reported that they had attended professional development workshops on promoting students' cross-cultural competence, accounting for cumulative 47,6% of the total sample.

3.5. Data Analysis

As long as this study adopted the mixed methods approach, the analysis of data was done through three phases as stated in Creswell and Creswell (2018). The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS to gain frequencies and percentages of participants' responses. The qualitative data were analyzed thematically. That is, the respondents' descriptions and suggestions were classified into themes and categories. The last phase was the mixed methods analysis in which the results (quantitative and qualitative) were merged using the side-by-side approach to account for the teachers' perceptions and practices of integrating cross-cultural competence in their teaching.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Teachers' Perceptions

4.1.1. Relevance of Cross-cultural Competence

Table 1: Participants' perceptions of the relevance of Cross-cultural competence

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	slightly relevant	9	14,3	14,3	14,3
	Moderately Relevant	14	22,2	22,2	36,5
	Very relevant	26	41,3	41,3	77,8
	Extremely Relevant	14	22,2	22,2	100,0
	Total	63	100,0	100,0	

Table 1 shows that the majority of participants (41,3%) considered that cross-cultural competence is very relevant to student's future success, which accounts for a cumulative 77,8% of the total sample. 14 participants (22,2%) noted that cross-cultural competence is moderately relevant. 22,2% of participants reported that it is extremely relevant for students' future success. Whereas, only 9 participants (14,3%) reported that cross-cultural competence is moderately relevant, accounting for a cumulative 14,3% of the total sample. However, none of the participants (0%) believed that cross-cultural competence is not relevant at all for students' future success.

4.1.2. The Importance of Cross-cultural Competence

Table 2: Participants' perceptions of the importance of CC

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Not important at all	1	1,6	1,6	1,6
	slightly important	5	7,9	7,9	9,5
	Moderately important	11	17,5	17,5	27,0

Very Important	22	34,9	34,9	61,9
Extremely important	24	38,1	38,1	100,0
Total	63	100,0	100,0	

As for the importance of cross-cultural competence in the EFL classroom, table 2 demonstrates that 24 participants (38,1%) believed it is extremely important, making up a cumulative 100% of the total sample. 22 participants (34,9%) reported that cross-cultural competence is very important in language teaching, accounting for a cumulative 61,9% of the total sample. 11 participants (17,5%) stated that this competence is moderately important, with a cumulative 27% of the total. 5 participants (7,9%) indicated that it is slightly important, with a cumulative 9,5% of the total sample. Whereas, only 1 participant (1,6%) believed that cross-cultural competence is not important at all in language education, accounting for a cumulative 1,6% of the total sample.

Based on Tables 1 and 2, we found out that the majority of teachers who participated in this study believed that cross-cultural competence is very relevant for students' future success and very important in the EFL classroom. This was also revealed in the descriptive statistics as shown in the chart below.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics

	N	Range	Mean	Std. Deviation
How important do you believe cross-cultural competence is in the EFL Classroom?	63	4	4,00	1,016
How relevant is cross-cultural competence to your student's future success?	63	3	3,71	,974
Valid N (listwise)	63			

Figure 3 shows that the mean value for the importance of cross-cultural competence is 4,00. This indicates that, on average, participants rated the importance of cross-cultural competence in EFL classes as quite high (between not at all important and extremely important). However, the standard deviation was 1,016, which indicates a considerable degree of variation in responses. This suggests that while the majority of participants believed that cross-cultural competence is important, there were notable differences in how participants perceived its importance, with some participants providing lower ratings and others offering higher ones. Overall, the participants perceived cross-cultural competence as important in language education. Quite similarly, table 3 also shows that the mean value for relevance is 3,71, which indicates that participants rated the relevance of cross-cultural competence for students' future success as quite high. The standard deviation was slightly less than 1 (0,974), which indicates a moderate degree of variation in responses. Generally, the majority of participants believed that cross-cultural competence was relevant for students' future success.

4.2. Intercultural Skills

Table 4: Skills teachers prioritize

	N	Percent
Intercultural_Skills ^a		
Understanding cultural differences	48	30,2%
Adapting communication style	35	22,0%
Open-mindedness	30	18,9%
Problem-solving in cross-cultural contexts	26	16,4%
Critical cultural reflection	20	12,6%

Total	159	100,0%	252,4%
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Table 4 shows that 48 participants (30,2%) prioritize understanding cultural differences in their teaching representing 76,2% of cases in which this cross-cultural skill is prioritized; while 35 of the participants (22%) noted that they focus on adapting communication style, with 55,6% of cases emphasizing this skill. And 30 teachers (18,9%) indicated that they focus on promoting open-mindedness, making up 47,6% of cases that prioritize this skill. On the other hand, higher-order skills like problem-solving in cross-cultural contexts and critical cultural reflection receive less emphasis.

Table 5: Skills teachers do not prioritize

		N	Percent	
Skills	Understanding cultural differences	15	9,6%	26,3%
	Adapting communication style	28	17,9%	49,1%
	Open-mindedness	33	21,2%	57,9%
	Problem-solving in cross-cultural contexts	37	23,7%	64,9%
	Critical cultural reflection	43	27,6%	75,4%
Total		156	100,0%	273,7%

For the intercultural-specific skills that high school teachers do not prioritize, Table 5 shows that 43 participants (27,6%) reported that they do not include critical cultural reflection skills in their teaching, representing 75,4% of cases that do not incorporate this skill. 37 of the participants (23,7%) do not prioritize problem-solving in cross-cultural contexts skills, with 64,9% of cases that do not involve these specific skills. However, other skills like understanding cultural differences, adapting communication styles and open-mindedness are quite more emphasized in their classroom teaching.

4.3. Pedagogical Practices

Table 6: The pedagogical tools and practices used by teachers

Practices ^a		Responses		
		N	Percent	Percent of Cases
Practices ^a	Using the textbook	28	15,6%	44,4%
	Using digital tools	33	18,4%	52,4%
	Encouraging discussion	45	25,1%	71,4%
	Encouraging translation	15	8,4%	23,8%
	Encouraging the use of mobile phone	14	7,8%	22,2%
	Critical incident analysis	6	3,4%	9,5%
	Project work on cultural themes and issues	16	8,9%	25,4%
	Roleplay	22	12,3%	34,9%
Total		179	100,0%	284,1%

Concerning the pedagogical practices and tools used for incorporating cross-cultural competence in EFL classrooms, Table 6 indicates that 45 participants (25,%) incorporate discussion and debates in their classes with 71,4% of cases where this practice is used. 33 of

teachers (18,4%) reported that they use digital tools representing 52,4% of cases in which this practice is commonly used. 28 of the sample (15,6%) indicated the use of textbooks as a tool to develop students' cross-cultural competence; and 15, 6% use the textbooks, with 44,4% of cases incorporating this tool. However, other methods like translation, incident analysis, the use of mobile phones, project work and role plays are less frequently employed by EFL classes.

Table 7: The pedagogical tools and practices teachers do not use

		N	Percent	
Practice	Using the textbook	35	10,8%	55,6%
	Using digital tools	30	9,2%	47,6%
	Encouraging discussion	18	5,5%	28,6%
	Encouraging translation	48	14,8%	76,2%
	Encouraging the use of mobile phone	49	15,1%	77,8%
	Critical incident analysis	57	17,5%	90,5%
	Project work on cultural themes and issues	47	14,5%	74,6%
	Roleplay	41	12,6%	65,1%
Total		325	100,0%	515,9%

Table 7 shows that 48 respondents (14.8%) reported not using translation for integrating cross-cultural competence in their classes. This practice was not used in 76.2% of cases. 49 respondents (15.1%) noted that they do not encourage the use of mobile phones, with 77.8% of cases not involving this practice. 57 respondents (17.5%) do not use critical incident analysis, representing 90.5% of cases where this practice was not employed. 47 respondents (14.5%) reported that they do not employ project work on cultural themes and issues for enhancing cross-cultural competence, making up 74.6% of cases where such practice was not implemented. 41 respondents (12.6%) indicated that role-play was not a common practice, accounting for 65.1% of cases where it was not used.

4.4.Challenges

Table 8: The challenges teachers face

		N	Percent	
Challenges	Students level	49	38,6%	77,8%
	Lack of students interest	26	20,5%	41,3%
	Insufficient resources and materials	34	26,8%	54,0%
	Lack of school support	18	14,2%	28,6%
Total		127	100,0%	201,6%

As far as the challenges that teachers face while incorporating cross-cultural competence in their classes, table 8 shows that 49 participants (38,6%) reported that they face students' low level as a challenge, which accounts for 77,8% of cases where it is faced. 34 of the participants (26,8%) noted that insufficient resources and materials is the main challenge they encounter, making up 54% of cases that face this challenge.

Table 9: The challenges teachers do not face

		N	Percent	
Challenges	Students level	14	11,2%	25,5%

Lack of students interest	37	29,6%	67,3%
Insufficient resources and materials	29	23,2%	52,7%
lack of school support	45	36,0%	81,8%
Total	125	100,0%	227,3%

Table 9 demonstrates that lack of student' interest and school support are less common challenges that the teachers face. It was indicated that 45 participants (36%) noted that lack of school support is not a challenge they face, representing 81,8% of cases where this was not reported as a challenge. 37 participants (67,3%) mentioned that lack of students' interest is not a challenge they encounter, making up 67,3% of cases where this was not considered as a challenge.

4.5 Teachers' descriptions of cross-cultural activities

The participants were also asked to describe an example of cross-cultural activity they use in their teaching to foster students' cultural skills. The findings uncovered five key themes:

a) **Discussion and debate:** Teachers put students in groups to discuss cultural issues, topics, differences and similarities. As some of them stated:

18: "Debates on the concept of feminism between the West and the east."

28: "I handed out some worksheets which include some pictures related to different cultural values and cultural issues to discuss in the classroom."

52: "Getting students to compare and contrast cultural items in different contexts."

b) **Presentations:** Teachers assign project work on various cultural themes and issues, and students prepare and create presentations on that. Such activities allow students to learn independently, develop presentation skills, and learn about other cultures. This activity emerged in several responses, such as:

4: "Students explore topics related to culture and deliver presentations."

60: "Students research a specific country or culture and the way they celebrate, then they prepare presentations, posters and displays, and share their productions about traditional food and activities. This event fosters intercultural understanding, promotes global citizenship, and develops research, presentation, and critical thinking skills."

c) **Idioms and proverbs:** Teachers provide students with idioms and proverbs, and students discuss them and try to find the equivalent ones in the Moroccan culture. This was noted by some participants as follows:

32: "I provide students with english idioms then i ask them to think of their equivalent idioms in their home culture."

55: "Using proverbs, describing their meanings and comparing them with Moroccan ones."

56: "I sometimes use terms in contexts, proverbs and compare them to Moroccan ones."

d) **Textbooks:** Teachers rely on the textbook to help learners learn about customs and traditions and issues across cultures. This is mostly done via reading texts and dialogues as noted by some participants:

15: "A Reading Text entitled "Don't Touch We are English" Giving an idea about cross-cultural greetings. Examples of High contact societies and Low Contact Societies, the notion of personal space and individualism compared to collectivism."

34: "Jigsaw. Reading texts abt different cultures."

58: "In the unit of culture, we talk about cultural things that are normal for us but would be weird/rude in another country and vice versa."

e) **Videos:** So many teachers resort to projecting videos to help students learn about other cultures. Such videos can show students cultural practices, celebrations and products from different countries, helping them develop critical reflection skills, listening skills and appreciation of differences. This was mentioned by several participants, such as:

33: "Using videos and audios of native speakers."

16: "Using videos to present and discuss cultural differences, and relate incidents that occur because of cultural differences to show the importance of understanding others culture, lifestyle or ways of doing things...such as signs, clothing, traditions, celebrations etc."

These extracted themes support the results above related to the participants' perspectives on prioritizing cross-cultural competence in EFL classes. The activities described here indicate that teachers are aware of the significance of cross-cultural competence in language teaching and its relevance for students' future success in multicultural situations.

4.6. Teachers' Suggestions for incorporating cross-cultural competence

The teachers under study were asked to give their opinions about what could be done to help teachers incorporate cross-cultural competence in EFL classes. In this regard, three essential key themes were highlighted in the participants responses:

a) **Training:** As the results indicated, the participants demonstrated a critical emphasis on training on how to integrate cross-cultural competence in EFL classroom for learning more about the topics to teach and the techniques and strategies to be used as some respondents stated:

1: *Be trained first on how to implement such topics at school. And then have plenty of opportunities to meet cross-cultural students. How can my students be interested if they won't meet foreigners.*

36: *Arranging a training program where teachers can learn different techniques and strategies on how to incorporate cross-cultural competence within their lesson plans.*

30: *Teachers should receive training (organizing workshops, seminars...)*

b) **Materials:** The participants also suggested equipping teachers with sufficient materials as a way to help them integrate cross-cultural skills in their teaching. This was noted by several respondents such as:

2: *Teachers should be equipped and motivated to implement cultural competence in their classes*

4: *Teaching materials and resources should be provided for the teachers.*

44: *The ministry should work on providing resources and textbooks that could promote students' readiness to accept and cherish cultural differences.*

54: *equip teachers with resources and tools to incorporate cross cultural competences*

c) **Coursebooks:** The participants also suggested updating the textbooks by including cross-cultural issues and skills to better meet the students' needs as well as the teachers'.

5: *Coursebooks designers should include lessons that tackle cross cultural competence*

15: *Thinking about new textbooks, materials and topics that cope with the ongoing changes taking place in the 21st century.*

47: *Varying and updating the topics related to cross cultural and providing materials which can help teaching cross-cultural competence interesting and useful to students*

These suggestions support the results provided by participants indicating that the textbook is among the top tools teachers use for fostering cross-cultural competence among

students. Also, such suggestions confirm the previous results related to the participants' demographics in which the vast majority of the sample reported that they had no formal training on teaching intercultural skills.

5. DISCUSSION

By and large, in the light of the results obtained in the current study, in-service high school teachers reported positive and desirable perspectives toward the incorporation of cross-cultural competence in EFL classes by considering it important in language education and relevant to the students' future success. This can be attributed to different factors, like the teachers' high level of intercultural sensitivity (Haddaoui, et. al., 2024). This aligns with previous research highlighting the pre-service teachers' awareness of the entanglement and connectedness of language and culture, and their agreement with the incorporation of cultural components in a lesson plan (Salazar & Carballo, 2011). In this respect, it is worth referring to Schulz (2007) and Brown's (2007) description of the interrelatedness of language and culture (as cited in Dema and Moeller, 2012) stating that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture. This was highly confirmed in the current study in which the majority of the sample showed their awareness of importance and relevance of cross-cultural competence for learners.

The present study also revealed that the majority of teachers under study focus a lot on developing students' understanding of cultural differences and similarities, adapting communication style skills and open-mindedness. This indicates that most of in-service teachers believe that for a student to be interculturally competent, they are required to possess adequate knowledge of their own cultures as well as the other cultures. This is congruent with the findings in Fatmi & Kerouad (2024) and Kouumachi (2015). Both studies highlighted the term intercultural proficiency, which means that students showed considerable knowledge of their own culture and the American culture. This can be attributed to various factors, like technology, cultural encounters (Salazar & Carballo, 2011), or even high school EFL classes emphasis as noted in the current study.

Moreover, the current research explored that the participants use various strategies and pedagogical practices in their classroom teaching to promote the above intercultural skills, as the teachers demonstrated and described, such as discussion, presentations, using textbooks and digital tools. This finding is congruent with that of Bican (2021) who found that it is important to compare different cultures to make students develop cross-cultural competence. Similarly, Fatmi & Kerouad (2024) and Kouumachi (2015) who found out that Moroccan EFL learners exhibited high level of intercultural proficiency; that is, they possessed factual knowledge about their own culture as well as the American culture. This can be attributed to the focus on the teachers' focus. However, this finding may seem incongruent with that of Salazar and Carballo (2011), who found that cultural encounters, having students meet with people from different cultures, can be the most appropriate way to develop students' intercultural competence. It is worth mentioning that this aligns with Deardorff's (2006) finding regarding «knowledge» as one of the major components of cross-cultural competence.

Another remarkable finding noted in this research is related to the participants' major challenges they encounter while incorporating cross-cultural activities in their classes. It was mentioned that students' level and insufficient materials are two main challenges teachers face. This could be the reason why most of the sample focuses on enhancing students' knowledge of cultural differences, and not going deeper into higher-order skills, like critical cultural reflection and problem-solving in cross-cultural context. However, in this case, it is worth mentioning one of the main findings in the work of Kerouad and Fatmi (2024) that students associated the American culture with movies. Thus, using movies and videos could be an effective way to enhance students' cross-cultural competence despite their language

deficiency.

As for the participants' suggestions for what could be done to help teachers incorporate cross-cultural competence in their teaching, the results found in this study indicate that training was at the top of the demands. This can be due to the lack of training in teacher education programs in Morocco. This is congruent with Echcharfy's (2022) findings in which the participants, who were pre-service teachers, declared that there was a scarcity of cultural courses. The significance of training related to intercultural incorporation was confirmed in several previous studies. Pierre, et. al. (2011) found that multicultural courses were successful in influencing the attitudes of students in the teacher education programs and making them more culturally aware. This strongly aligns with Sleeter (2008) who concluded that teaching pre-service students something about culture and race will make them better teachers in multicultural contexts.

The participants in this study also suggested providing sufficient materials and updating textbooks to pave the way for teachers to incorporate cross-cultural competence in their teaching. This overlaps with their answers in pedagogical practices they use in which 35 participants (10,8%) declared that they use the textbook. This indicates that teachers rely more on this pedagogical tool to foster cross-cultural competence among their students. This finding also confirms the participants' claim that insufficient materials are one of the main challenges they face. In this regard, 34 participants (26,8%) stated that the scarcity of materials is the major barrier that prevents them from prioritizing cross-cultural competence in their EFL classes.

6. IMPLICATIONS

The current study contributed to the understanding of the teachers' views and practices related to the prioritization of cross-cultural competence in today's EFL classes. Thus, the findings of this research can serve as an insightful source for educational authorities, teacher training programs, and policymakers to ensure that high school students receive the necessary skills to interact respectfully and effectively in multicultural situations. Furthermore, this study highlights the main challenges teachers face in terms of cross-cultural education. Thus, it provides suggestions and recommendations to overcome these challenges for improving the incorporation of cross-cultural competence in today's EFL classes.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite its contribution to the understanding of in-service high school teachers' perspectives and practices related to the promotion of cross-cultural competence among students, This study remains relatively limited in terms of the generalizability of its results. One of its main limitations is the limited sample size. This factor has remarkably impacted and hindered concluding the relationship between individual demographic factors and teachers' perspectives and practices. Also, this current study is limited in terms of the sampling method used, which is the non-random sampling method. This method may restrict the generalizability and representativeness of the results. Not only this, but the current study is also limited in terms of the data collection instrument used, which is the online survey. This instrument might have impacted the authenticity and objectivity of the results. Therefore, these limitations should be seriously taken into consideration when concluding.

Furthermore, investigating the in-service teachers' perspectives, practices and suggestions related to cross-cultural education has pointed out various applicable notions in this field. One of the key notions that this research has explored is the emphasis on training. Therefore, it is recommended that future research in the field of cross-cultural education shed more light on the theme of training as a key prospect in the incorporation of cross-cultural competence in EFL classes. It is worth investigating teachers' needs, interests and suggestions for informing teacher education program designers to better improve the training quality and

ensure that students receive the necessary intercultural skills to succeed communicatively and professionally in multicultural situations.

8. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that teachers under study are highly aware of the significance and relevance of cross-cultural competence for high school students. This awareness is probably the reason behind their endeavour to integrate cross-cultural activities into their teaching practices despite the scarcity of training and the difficulties and challenges they encounter. The analysis of teachers' responses related to the skills they intend to enhance among students revealed that understanding cultural differences and similarities is at the top of concerns. Whereas, there is a remarkable lack of focus on higher-order skills, such as critical reflection and problem-solving in cross-cultural contexts. The analysis also revealed that teachers' classroom practices align with their suggestions. This indicates that their suggestions should be highly considered for quality improvement related to cross-cultural integration. In general, the current research attempted to understand teachers' views, practices, suggestions and challenges related to cross-cultural competence integration in EFL classes in a Moroccan high school context. It was revealed that systematic training can be a way to overcome the challenges and ensure the integration of the necessary intercultural skills. Thus, future research should target the training by investigating teachers' needs and interests.

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