



Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence Through an Intercultural Communication Course: Evidence from Moroccan University EFL Students

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Abstract

With the growing impact of globalisation, foreign language education has increasingly emphasised the ability to communicate across cultures. In view of this, the present study examines the effectiveness of an Intercultural Communication course in developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) among Moroccan university EFL students. To this end, drawing on Byram's (1997) model of ICC, a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design was adopted. The study included 99 third-year English-major students who were assigned to an experimental group (n = 56) and a control group (n = 43). The data was collected through an intercultural test assessing four ICC dimensions: intercultural knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. The findings revealed that students who attended the course showed greater improvement across all four dimensions compared to those who were not exposed to the course. The most remarkable progress was observed in intercultural knowledge and skills, while the development in critical cultural awareness, although significant, was less noticeable. In light of these findings, the study recommends integrating intercultural communication more systematically into EFL curricula in Moroccan higher education and placing greater emphasis on critically oriented tasks. It also highlights the need for sustained instructional practices that support the gradual development of critical cultural awareness.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the rapid pace of globalisation, the internationalisation of education, and the growing academic mobility, which have increased the diversity of contact between people from different cultural backgrounds, the aims of Foreign Language Education (FLE) have been reshaped. Language learning is no longer restricted to the acquisition of grammar structures or achieving a native-like fluency. Nowadays, it is the goal of FLE to equip learners with

intercultural communication skills and abilities to prepare them to communicate effectively and appropriately across cultural boundaries. In this respect, Byram (1997) argues that “the purpose of language teaching is not only to give learners linguistic competence but also to prepare them for interaction with people of other cultures” (p. 7). Therefore, this view highlights the need for pedagogical approaches that explicitly integrate intercultural dimensions into language instruction (Alrefae & Al-Shammari, 2026).

Within this framework, intercultural communication courses, as a pedagogical response to the need for systematic intercultural learning, have been introduced in the last few decades as independent courses in various universities around the world. Such courses aim to develop learners’ awareness towards cultural diversity and their ability to interpret communicative practices within broader social and ideological contexts. Many researchers have highlighted the importance of structured instructional contexts (e.g., Intercultural Communication courses) in fostering ICC development. In this regard, Deardorff (2006) notes that “intercultural competence is not acquired automatically through exposure to cultural difference, but rather through intentional, guided learning and reflection” (p. 256).

Empirical studies around the world suggest that intercultural-oriented instruction can enhance learners’ attitudes and communicative practices (Karras, 2017; Lee & Song, 2019; Lindmeier et al., 2023). However, African and North African EFL contexts remain underrepresented in this body of research. In the Moroccan context, despite the growing importance of English and increasing intercultural demands placed on university EFL students, language instruction has largely emphasised linguistic form rather than intercultural meaning (Lazrak, 2016; Barebzi, 2021). Moreover, regardless of the meaningful impact of incorporating intercultural teaching in higher education, “most Moroccan universities have not yet decided to teach intercultural competence as a separate course inside university classrooms, notably in the teaching of languages” (El Hadri, 2022, p. 37). Although Intercultural Communication courses have been introduced in a few universities, their impact on students’ ICC development remains insufficiently explored. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the effectiveness of an Intercultural Communication course in fostering ICC among Moroccan university EFL students.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Intercultural Communicative Competence

Scholars have conceptualised the multidimensional aspects of intercultural communicative competence (e.g., Bennett, 1993; Byram, 1997; Fantini, 2000; Deardorff, 2004; Sercu, 2004; Sercu et al., 2005), but no consensus about its definition has been reached. It has been labelled in several terms, such as intercultural competence or intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997; Crozet, Liddicoat & Lo Bianco, 1999; Fantini, 2006), cross-cultural awareness (Knutson, 2006), intercultural awareness (Chamberlin-Quinlisk, 2005), and intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1993). Among these labels, intercultural competence and intercultural communicative competence are the most frequently employed in foreign language education.

Although ICC has been defined in different ways, Deardorff (2006) states that Byram’s (1997) model of ICC has achieved consensus among scholars for capturing the complexity of the construct. Byram’s definition, as stated by Deardorff, was summarised as “Knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others’ values, beliefs, and behaviours; and relativising one’s self. Linguistic competence plays a key role” (Byram, 1997, p. 34, cited in Deardorff, 2006).

Byram's (1997) model of ICC, in which this study is grounded, is a whole range of different kinds of savoirs which are illuminated through certain teaching objectives: (1) Attitudes (savoir être) towards "people who are perceived as different in respect of the cultural meaning, beliefs, and behaviours they exhibit" (p. 50). It involves attitudes of curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about one's own (pp. 34, 35). (2) Knowledge (savoirs) about "social groups and their products, practices, and process of interaction in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country" (Byram, 1997, p. 51). (3) Skills of interpreting and relating (savoir comprendre) represent the ability to "interpret a document or event from another culture, and to explain it from one's cultural perspective" (Byram, 1997, p. 52). (4) Skills of discovery and interaction (savoir apprendre/faire) are defined as the ability to "acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to use knowledge, attitudes, and skills in real-time communication and interaction" (Byram, 1997, p. 52). (5) Critical cultural awareness/political education denotes an ability to "evaluate critically the perspectives, practices, and products in one's own and other cultures" (Byram, 1997, p. 53).

2.2. Effects of Intercultural Communication Courses on Intercultural Communicative Competence

A synthesis of studies on the effectiveness of intercultural communication courses in developing students' intercultural communicative competence reveals that participants who take such courses develop their overall understanding of the target cultures (Karras, 2017; Tuncel & Paker, 2018; Deveci et al., 2021). Empirical evidence, however, suggests that the extent of this development varies depending on learners' prior experiences and methodological approaches. For instance, Karras (2017) employed a quasi-experimental quantitative design to examine the impact of an intercultural communication course on Greek students' intercultural sensitivity using the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS). The findings showed no statistically significant overall difference between pre- and post-test scores, except for the dimensions of interaction engagement and respect for cultural differences. These limited gains were attributed to students' prior international exposure and strong foreign language backgrounds, suggesting a high initial level of intercultural sensitivity. Nevertheless, the study was constrained by a small, non-representative sample and the lack of methodological triangulation.

In contrast, Tuncel and Paker (2018) examined the effectiveness of an intercultural communication course in a Turkish English Language Teaching context using a mixed-methods quasi-experimental design. The results indicated significant pre- to post-test gains in intercultural sensitivity, supporting the value of integrating intercultural approaches into higher education curricula. Nevertheless, the authors cautioned that students' initially high levels of sensitivity and external factors such as real intercultural contact may have influenced the outcomes. They also noted limitations related to course duration and the exclusive focus of the ISS on intercultural sensitivity, concluding that such findings should be interpreted primarily as evidence of increased awareness rather than comprehensive ICC development.

Similarly, Deveci et al. (2021) employed a quasi-experimental mixed-methods approach to explore the effects of an intercultural communication course on Emirati undergraduate students' intercultural sensitivity. The intercultural sensitivity scale and reflective writing tasks were combined in the study to address the complexity of ICC. All ICC dimensions exhibited statistically significant improvements, although interaction engagement and interaction confidence showed the most remarkable development. The results demonstrate that intercultural communication courses support students' intercultural understanding, despite acknowledged limitations of sample size and gender imbalance.

In line with studies showing the effectiveness of intercultural and multicultural courses in developing students' ICC, Lindmeier et al. (2023), relying on archived data, investigated the

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impact of two diversity-oriented courses, Critical Race Theory in Education (CRT) and Human Relations in a Multicultural Society (HRMS), on undergraduate students' intercultural competence. Using the Intercultural Development Inventory, the study found that students who had previously taken the CRT course began with significantly higher intercultural competence scores. However, they did not make significant gains during the HRMS course, while students who had not taken CRT improved significantly. These findings suggest that multicultural education can enhance intercultural competence, especially among students with lower initial levels, but prior intercultural learning may reduce the amount of measurable progress during later courses.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Objectives, Questions and Hypotheses

To guide the investigation, the present study was structured around clearly defined objectives that reflect the main components of intercultural communicative competence:

1. To examine whether learners taking the Intercultural Communication course outperform those who do not in the area of knowledge.
2. To explore whether learners taking the Intercultural Communication course outperform those who do not in the area of skills of interpreting and relating.
3. To explore whether learners taking the Intercultural Communication course outperform those who do not in the area of skills of discovery and interaction.
4. To test whether learners taking the Intercultural Communication course outperform those who do not in the area of critical cultural awareness.

In line with these objectives, the study addresses a set of research questions that frame the comparative dimension of the investigation:

1. To what extent do the learners exposed to the Intercultural Communication course develop their intercultural communicative competence in the area of knowledge in comparison with those who are not?
2. To what extent do the learners exposed to the Intercultural Communication course develop their intercultural communicative competence in the area of skills of interpreting and relating in comparison with those who are not?
3. To what extent do the learners exposed to the Intercultural Communication course develop their intercultural communicative competence in the area of skills of discovery and interaction in comparison with those who are not?
4. To what extent do the learners exposed to the Intercultural Communication course develop their intercultural communicative competence in the area of critical cultural awareness in comparison with those who are not?

Based on the objectives and research questions, a set of hypotheses was formulated to be empirically tested:

1. The learners exposed to the intercultural communication course will outperform those who are not in the area of knowledge.
2. The learners exposed to the intercultural communication course will outperform those who are not in the area of skills of interpreting and relating.
3. The learners exposed to the intercultural communication course will outperform those who are not in the area of skills of discovery and interaction.
4. The learners exposed to the intercultural communication course will outperform those who are not in the area of critical cultural awareness.

3.2. Design and Procedures

Adopting a quasi-experimental quantitative design, this study seeks to investigate the effectiveness of an intercultural communication course in developing Moroccan university EFL students' intercultural communicative competence in the areas of knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. This design is widely recommended in educational research when researchers seek to examine the impact of an intervention, but random assignment of participants is not possible (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Johnson & Christensen, 2020). In addition to its nature as a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest, it adopts a quantitative research design that enables a systematic measurement of change through numerical data.

3.3. Setting and Sampling

The study was conducted in two Moroccan institutions. The School of Arts and Humanities, Moulay Ismail University, from which the experimental group was selected, since students there take an intercultural communication course, whereas the School of Arts and Humanities, Mohammed V University, served as a setting for the control group, as students there do not receive any intercultural communication course. The sample of the study included 99 third-year English-major students: 56 students in the experimental group and 43 students in the control group. Based on the "Intercultural Communication" course, the experimental group received the treatment in a two-hour session per week over a whole semester. As educational settings do not allow for random sampling, a convenience sampling technique was adopted in the selection of the participants. Convenience sampling is, in fact, one of the most commonly and widely used sampling procedures in ELT and second language acquisition studies. In this regard, Dörnyei (2007) notes that "the majority of empirical research in the social sciences is not based on random samples" (p. 99).

3.4. Data Collection

In the present study, the data was collected using an intercultural test developed by El Hiani (2018) and subsequently refined to meet the objectives of this study. The instrument assesses four core components of ICC: intercultural knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness (CCA). The test was selected given its theoretical grounding in Byram's (1997) model of ICC and its prior validation within similar educational contexts. Minor refinements were made to ensure contextual relevance and clarity of items, while preserving the original construct validity. The instrument was administered before and after the treatment to capture measurable changes in participants' intercultural communicative competence.

3.5. Treatment / Procedure

The treatment was implemented at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Moulay Ismail University. The intervention was preceded by a pre-test, which was completed by students in the experimental and control groups to determine their initial levels of intercultural knowledge, intercultural skills, and critical cultural awareness. The course was designed to develop students' intercultural communicative competence through nine units, addressing several issues, including the role of cultural context, verbal and nonverbal communication, and issues of identity. The course also engaged students in historical and critical perspectives on intercultural communication. Other units focused on culture-related conflicts, acculturation processes, and culture shock. Finally, the course emphasised the role of intercultural communication in everyday life and in tourism contexts. Students in the control group, however, were exposed to various topics included in their standard academic curriculum without explicit intercultural communication content. At the end of the course, students in both groups were administered an intercultural test to gain insights into their ICC development.

3.6. Data Analysis

The data obtained from this study were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistical procedures. Descriptive statistics, including the mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum, were computed to provide an overall profile of participants' performance and score dispersion. Inferential analysis was conducted using paired samples t-test and the independent t-test as the major statistical measures. In addition, Cohen's d was also run to estimate the effect of the mean differences, allowing for an interpretation of practical significance beyond statistical significance. The data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS).

4. RESULTS

4.1. The Development of the Learners' Intercultural Knowledge

4.1.1. Pre- and Post-treatment Analysis

Table 1 offers an account of the mean scores of students' responses to the items in the intercultural test regarding intercultural knowledge among the sample groups prior to and after the experiment. The analysis of the data revealed that the experimental group (EXG) demonstrated a significant improvement in their knowledge of Moroccan culture, American culture, and Moroccan-American relations, as indicated by the observed increase in the mean scores between pre-test and post-test. In this regard, the mean score for knowledge of Moroccan culture increased from a pre-test score of 2.52 to a post-test score of 3.40, the knowledge of Moroccan-American relations mean score increased from 3.10 in the pre-test to 3.78 in the post-test, and the mean score for knowledge of American culture ascended from 2.32 to 3.60. Additionally, the standard deviations for the experimental group's post-test scores decreased significantly across all knowledge areas, indicating less variability and more consistency in the participants' performance as a result of the intervention. Furthermore, the reduction in standard deviations suggests that the intervention was successful in promoting consistent learning outcomes among participants. In other words, the intervention likely helped participants gain intercultural knowledge more consistently, potentially enhancing their ability to understand, appreciate, and navigate cultural differences. Therefore, the course 'Intercultural Communication' had a positive impact on the experimental group's intercultural knowledge development.

As for the control group (CG) results, despite the ascending level of knowledge in all the elements of intercultural knowledge, the group showed more modest improvements, with the mean scores increasing from 2.82 to 3.09 for knowledge of Moroccan culture, from 3.38 to 3.76 for knowledge of Moroccan-American relations, and from 2.41 to 2.79 for knowledge of American culture. This modest improvement in the control group students' scores indicated that some learning and knowledge acquisition occurred without the specific intervention. This could be attributed to general classroom instruction, autonomous learning, or other external factors. Moreover, the results of the control group revealed relatively stable or slightly decreased standard deviations, suggesting more consistent performance among participants. This consistency implies that the learning environment and instructional methods used with the control group did not encourage knowledge development for the participants.

Table 1. The Learners' Means Prior to and After the Experiment

	Experimental Group				Control Group			
	Mean (Pre)	Std. D	Mean (Post)	Std. D	Mean (Pre)	Std. D	Mean (Post)	Std. D
Knowledge of Moroccan Culture	2.52	.68	3.40	.48	2.82	.51	3.09	.49
Knowledge of Moroccan-	3.10	.60	3.78	.53	3.38	.81	3.76	.59

American Relations								
Knowledge of American Culture	2.32	.73	3.60	.41	2.41	.83	2.79	.53

On the whole, the results of the pre- and post-test suggested that while the intervention was highly effective in enhancing knowledge, it affected individual learners differently. This emphasises the need for differentiated instructional strategies to ensure more positive outcomes for all learners.

4.1.2. Between and within-group Development

Table 2 presents the results of the independent t-test, comparing the experimental and the control groups on their intercultural knowledge development across three areas: knowledge about Moroccan culture, Moroccan-American relations, and American culture. Regarding knowledge of Moroccan culture, the control group initially had slightly higher pre-test scores ($M = 2.82$) than the experimental group ($M = 2.52$). Therefore, based on the t-test results, the difference between the means was statistically significant, $t(97) = -2.381$, $p = .019$. Since $p < .05$, the null hypothesis is rejected, indicating a significant difference between the experimental and control groups in the pre-test regarding knowledge about Moroccan culture. In the post-test, however, the experimental group scored significantly higher ($M = 3.40$) compared to the control group ($M = 3.09$). Therefore, based on the findings, there is a statistically significant difference between the two groups, $t(97) = 3.149$, $p = .002$, indicating that students in the experimental group exhibited a significant improvement in their mean scores, outperforming their counterparts in the control group. As a result, the intervention was effective in increasing knowledge about Moroccan culture.

Table 2. Between-Group Developments in the Area of Intercultural Knowledge (Independent-Samples t-Test)

	Group	Mean	t	df	Mean Diff.	Sig (2-tailed)	H ₀
Knowledge about Moroccan Culture							
Pre-treatment	EXG	2.52	-2.381	97	-.29	.019	Rejected
	CG	2.82					
Post-treatment	EXG	3.40	3.149	97	.31	.002	Rejected
	CG	3.09					
Knowledge about Moroccan-American Relations							
Pre-treatment	EXG	3.10	-1.934	97	-.27	.056	Accepted
	CG	3.38					
Post-treatment	EXG	3.78	.160	97	.01	.873	Accepted
	CG	3.76					
Knowledge about American Culture							
Pre-treatment	EXG	2.32	-.577	97	-.09	.565	Accepted
	CG	2.41					
Post-treatment	EXG	3.60	8.417	97	.80	.000	Rejected
	CG	2.79					

Regarding knowledge of Moroccan-American relations, despite the relatively slight differences in their means, both groups appeared to have nearly identical levels prior to and after the experiment. In this regard, the results of the pre-test revealed that the control group scored slightly higher than the experimental group ($M = 3.38$ and $M = 3.10$, respectively). However, this difference was not statistically significant, $t(97) = -1.934$, $p = .056$. Similarly, the post-test results revealed that both groups had almost a similar performance despite the minor difference in their mean scores. In this regard, the experimental group had a mean score of 3.78 while the mean score of the control group was 3.76 with a mean difference of .01.

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According to the results, this difference was not statistically significant, $t(97) = .160$, $p = .873$, indicating that the intervention did not significantly impact this area of intercultural knowledge.

With regard to knowledge of American culture, the results demonstrated that both groups had similar mean scores before the experiment. The experimental group had a mean score of 2.32, and the control group had a mean score of 2.41, with a mean difference of $-.09$. Based on the t-test results, the difference between the means was not statistically significant between the sample groups in the pre-test, $t(97) = -.577$, $p = .56$. However, the post-treatment results revealed that participants in the experimental group showed a significant development in their mean scores ($M = 3.60$) compared to the control group ($M = 2.79$), with the largest mean difference of $.80$. Additionally, the t-test results showed that the difference between the means was statistically significant between the groups in the post-test, $t(97) = 8.417$, $p = .000$. Therefore, students who took the course 'Intercultural Communication' appeared to develop their knowledge about American culture compared to those who did not take the course.

Building on the previous findings, within-group differences were examined using a paired-sample t-test to compare pre- and post-test scores across the three knowledge areas. The findings (in Table 3) indicate that both the experimental and control groups generally improved their intercultural knowledge, as the scores increased for both groups from pre-test to post-test, with greater mean differences observed in the experimental group than in the control group. This finding indicates that the treatment had a greater impact on the experimental group across all areas of intercultural knowledge.

Table 3. Within-Group Developments in the Area of Intercultural Knowledge (Paired-Samples t-Test)

Group	Treatment	Mean	t	df	Mean Diff.	Std. D	Sig (2-tailed)	H ₀
Knowledge about Moroccan Culture								
EXG	Pre-treatment	2.52	-8.45	55	-.87	.77	.000	Rejected
	Post-treatment	3.40						
CG	Pre-treatment	2.82	-4.10	42	-.26	.42	.000	Rejected
	Post-treatment	3.09						
Knowledge about Moroccan-American Relations								
EXG	Pre-treatment	3.10	-6.39	55	-.67	.79	.000	Rejected
	Post-treatment	3.78						
CG	Pre-treatment	3.38	-5.05	42	-.38	.49	.000	Rejected
	Post-treatment	3.76						
Knowledge about American Culture								
EXG	Pre-treatment	2.32	-12.00	55	-1.27	.79	.000	Rejected
	Post-treatment	3.60						
CG	Pre-treatment	2.41	-5.82	42	-.37	.42	.000	Rejected
	Post-treatment	2.79						

Concerning knowledge of Moroccan culture, the mean score of the experimental group increased from 2.52 before the course to 3.40 after the course with a mean difference of $.87$. Based on the results, this difference was statistically significant, $t(55) = -8.45$, $p = .000$. The effect size was large ($d = 1.1$). Similarly, there was an improvement in the mean score of the control group from 2.82 in the pre-test to 3.09 in the post-test, with a mean difference of $.26$. The group showed a statistically significant improvement, $t(42) = -4.10$, $p = .000$. Therefore, the results revealed that the experimental group exhibited significantly greater improvements in knowledge of Moroccan culture compared to the control group.

With regard to knowledge about Moroccan-American relations, the results obtained demonstrated that the experimental group's mean score improved from 3.10 in the pre-test to 3.78 in the post-test, with a mean difference of $.67$, while that of the control group increased

from 3.38 to 3.76, with a mean difference of .38. Both improvements were statistically significant (EXG: $t(55) = -6.39, p = .000$; CG: $t(42) = -5.05, p = .000$). Furthermore, Cohen's d analysis showed a large effect size ($d = 0.8$). These findings suggest that despite the improvement in both groups' knowledge about Moroccan-American relations, the learners who received the course on intercultural communication experienced a slightly larger mean difference compared to those who did not.

As for knowledge about American culture, the findings of the paired-sample t -test indicated that the experimental group showed a remarkable development with the increase of the mean score from 2.32 before the course to 3.60 after the course. This improvement resulted in a mean difference of 1.27. Based on the t -test results, the difference was statistically significant, $t(55) = -12.00, p = .000$. Moreover, the effect size was large ($d = 1.6$). As a result, the remarkable increase in the post-test mean score of the experimental group, in addition to the large negative t -value and the mean difference, suggests a strong and positive impact of the course 'Intercultural Communication' on participants' understanding of American culture. On the other hand, the control group's mean score slightly increased from a pre-test score of 2.41 to a post-test score of 2.79, with a small t -value of -5.82 and a mean difference of 0.37. However, the difference was statistically significant, with a p -value of .000.

4.2. The Development of the Learners' Skills of Interpreting and Relating

4.2.1. Pre- and Post-treatment Analysis

Table 4 shows a comparison between the students' mean scores in the sample groups in the area of skills of interpreting and relating. Based on the results, although both groups improved, the improvement was significant and remarkable among students in the experimental group compared to the control group, revealing the impact of the course 'Intercultural Communication' on learners' skills of interpreting and relating.

In the experimental group, the mean score for skills of interpreting and relating showed a remarkable increase from 1.86 before taking the course to 2.75 after taking the course, emphasising that the experiment was successful in helping learners recognise ethnocentric viewpoints in a text or event, recognise areas of misunderstanding and dysfunction in intercultural exchanges and explain them based on all the cultural systems at play, and mediate between divergent explanations of different phenomena. The reduction in standard deviation values from 1.01 in the pre-test to 0.43 in the post-test further supports this conclusion, indicating that the course not only raised the average performance but also led to more consistent results among participants through the instructional approach adopted.

In contrast to the experimental group, the control group also showed an improvement in skills of interpreting and relating with a more modest increase in the mean score from 1.37 in the pre-test to 1.86 in the post-test, which suggests that other factors, such as general classroom instruction or the learners' progress through their educational journey, contributed to this slight improvement within the control group. Additionally, despite the decrease in standard deviation values from 0.87 to 0.63, the variation in results remained relatively higher compared to the experimental group.

Table 4. The Learners' Means Prior to and After the Experiment

	Experimental Group				Control Group			
	Mean (Pre)	Std. D	Mean (Post)	Std. D	Mean (Pre)	Std. D	Mean (Post)	Std. D
Skills of Interpreting and Relating	1.86	1.01	2.75	.43	1.37	.87	1.86	.63

4.2.2. Between- and Within-Group Development

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Following the previous results, it is important to provide a comparative analysis of the groups' performance prior to and after the experiment. To this end, an independent-sample t-test was conducted to compare the mean scores of skills of interpreting and relating between the experimental and control groups before and after the intervention (see Table 5). The results revealed that both groups initially had relatively low and mostly similar levels, with the experimental group scoring slightly higher than the control group. In this regard, the experimental group had a mean score of 1.86, while the control group had a mean score of 1.37 with a mean difference of .48. Despite the slight difference between the groups' scores prior to the experiment, the t-test results demonstrated that the null hypothesis should be rejected at the 5% level of significance, as the p-value (Sig = .01) was less than .05, indicating a statistically significant difference between the groups.

After the treatment, the experimental group's mean score increased to 2.75, whereas that of the control group was 1.86, with a mean difference of 0.89. The t-test results demonstrated that the difference is statistically significant, with a p-value (Sig = .00) less than .05, resulting in the rejection of the null hypothesis. It is noteworthy that the post-treatment analysis showed a substantially greater difference between the two groups, implying that the course 'Intercultural Communication' had a positive and considerable effect on improving the skills of interpreting and relating among learners in the experimental group. Overall, the previous results underscored that the skills of interpreting and relating improved significantly in the experimental group compared to the control group, with a more conspicuous difference observed after the treatment.

Table 5. Between-Group Developments in the Area of Skills of Interpreting and Relating (Independent-Samples t-Test)

Treatment	Group	Mean	t	df	Mean Diff.	Sig (2-tailed)	H ₀
Skills of Interpreting and Relating							
Pre-treatment	EXG	1.86	2.499	97	.48	.01	Rejected
	CG	1.37					
Post-treatment	EXG	2.75	8.215	97	.89	.00	Rejected
	CG	1.86					

Based on the significant difference found earlier, the within-group analysis, illustrated in Table 6 below, indicated that the students in the experimental group made significant progress after being exposed to the 'Intercultural Communication' course, as their scores increased from 1.86 in the pre-test to 2.75 in the post-test, while students' scores in the control group exhibited a minor change from 1.37 in the pre-test to 1.86 in the post-test. The mean difference in the sample groups ranged from 0.48 (the control group) to 0.89 (the experimental group). As confirmed by the paired-samples t-test, the improvement suggested by the descriptive statistics was significant for both groups, as the p-value (Sig = .00) was less than the critical value (.05). For the experimental group, the results of Cohen's d suggested that the effect size was large (d = .83). Overall, the previous results emphasised that the skills of interpreting and relating improved significantly in the experimental group compared to the control group, with a larger difference observed after the treatment.

Table 6. Within-Group Developments in the Area of Skills of Interpreting and Relating (Paired-Samples t-Test)

Group	Treatment	Mean	t	df	Mean Diff.	Std. D	Sig (2-tailed)	H ₀
Skills of Interpreting and Relating								
EXG	Pre-treatment	1.86	-6.225	55	-.89	1.07	.000	Rejected
	Post-treatment	2.75						
CG	Pre-treatment	1.37	-3.871	42	-.48	.82	.000	Rejected

4.3. The Development of the Learners' Skills of Discovery and Interaction

4.3.1. Pre- and Post-treatment Analysis

Table 7 demonstrates the pre- and post-treatment means linked with the learners' skills of discovery and interaction in the sample groups. Based on the descriptive statistics, the results revealed that the two groups were different and that both groups witnessed a sort of improvement. Nevertheless, the improvement was remarkable among students in the experimental group in comparison to the control group, underscoring the effect of the course 'Intercultural Communication' on learners' skills of discovery and interaction.

Concerning the experimental group, the pre-test mean score for skills of discovery and interaction was 3.91, with a standard deviation of 1.06. After the treatment, the mean score increased to 4.77, with a slightly higher standard deviation of 1.11, indicating both an improvement in skills of discovery and interaction and a minor increase in score variability. In contrast, the participants in the control group had a mean score of 2.35 in the pre-test with a standard deviation of 0.97. In the post-test, the group's mean score increased to 3.00, while the standard deviation decreased to 0.78, showing an improvement in skills of discovery and interaction but with less variability. By and large, the comparison between the two groups regarding skills of discovery and interaction highlights that the students in the experimental group not only started with a higher baseline score but also experienced a more remarkable increase in their mean score (from 3.91 to 4.77) compared to the control group's increase (from 2.35 to 3.00). This suggests that the course was more effective in enhancing the skills of discovery and interaction among students in the experimental group.

Table 7. The Learners' Means Prior to and After the Experiment

	Experimental Group				Control Group			
	Mean (Pre)	Std. D	Mean (Post)	Std. D	Mean (Pre)	Std. D	Mean (Post)	Std. D
Skills of Discovery and Interaction	3.91	1.06	4.77	1.11	2.35	.97	3.00	.78

4.3.2. Between- and Within-Group Development

The independent-sample t-test results, presented in Table 8, revealed a significant difference in the area of skills of discovery and interaction between the experimental and the control group, both prior to and following the treatment. In light of the pre-treatment analysis, the findings show that the mean score for the experimental group was 3.91, compared to 2.35 for the control group, yielding a mean difference of 1.56. Based on the t-test results, it seems that the difference was statistically significant since the significance level was less than .05 (Sig = .00 < .05), leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. On the other hand, the post-treatment analysis showed that the mean score for the experimental group increased to 4.77, whereas the control group's mean score ascended to 3.00, with a mean difference of 1.76. With a p-value of .000, the null hypothesis was rejected, indicating a statistically significant difference. These findings suggest that the experiment had a significantly greater effect on enhancing the skills of discovery and interaction among the students in the experimental group compared to those in the control group.

Table 8. Between-Group Developments in the Area of Skills of Discovery and Interaction (Independent-Samples t-Test)

Treatment	Group	Mean	t	df	Mean Diff.	Sig (2-tailed)	H ₀
Skills of Discovery and Interaction							
Pre-treatment	EXG	3.91	7.50	97	1.56	.000	Rejected

	CG	2.35					
Post-treatment	EXG	4.77	8.85	97	1.76	.000	Rejected
	CG	3.00					

Based on descriptive statistics, it was observed that the students in both sample groups improved their skills of discovery and interaction. However, the improvement was remarkable among students in the experimental group. Their mean score in the post-test was higher than that of the pre-test with a mean difference of .857, whereas a slight increase in the students' mean score was detected in the control group, as they scored 2.35 in the pre-test and 3.00 in the post-test with a mean difference estimated at .65. In this regard, as shown in Table 9 below, the results associated with the paired samples t-test revealed that the progress made by both groups was statistically significant, as the p-value (Sig = .00) was less than the critical value of .05. For the experimental group, the results of Cohen's d suggested that the effect size was moderate (d = .62).

Table 9. Within-Group Developments in the Area of Skills of Discovery and Interaction (Paired-Samples t-Test)

Group	Treatment	Mean	t	df	Mean Diff.	Std. D	Sig (2-tailed)	H ₀
Skills of Discovery and Interaction								
EXG	Pre-treatment	3.91	-4.690	55	-.857	1.368	.000	Rejected
	Post-treatment	4.77						
CG	Pre-treatment	2.35	-4.090	42	-.651	1.044	.000	Rejected
	Post-treatment	3.00						

4.4. The Development of the Learners' Critical Cultural Awareness

4.4.1. Pre- and Post-treatment Analysis

Table 10 shows a comparison between the students' mean scores in the sample groups in the area of CCA. The descriptive results revealed a great difference between the mean scores of the students in the experimental group and the control group. Furthermore, although the experimental group initially scored higher than the control group, it was noticed that both groups made significant improvements in CCA. Nevertheless, the improvement was more conspicuous among students in the experimental group, highlighting the impact of the course 'Intercultural Communication' in enhancing the learners' level of this dimension of intercultural communicative competence.

Concerning the experimental group, the results demonstrated that the mean score significantly increased from 3.36 prior to the treatment to 6.29 after the treatment, with the standard deviation decreasing from 2.37 to 1.95. This increase in the mean score suggests that the intervention applied to this group was more effective in enhancing the participants' CCA. This improvement indicates that the learners in the experimental group were able to employ a variety of analytical tools, which allowed them to examine documents or events within their full context, including their origins, historical period, geographical setting, and other relevant criteria. More importantly, through their analysis of the texts, they were able to go beyond the surface level to uncover the ideologies at play. Additionally, the decrease in standard deviation values further supports this conclusion, indicating that the Intercultural Communication course not only enhanced the learners' average performance but also led to more consistent results among participants through the instructional approach applied.

With regard to the control group, the results showed that the mean score increased from 1.95 in the pre-test to 3.88 in the post-test, with standard deviations of 2.02 and 1.46, respectively. While this group also showed improvement, the increase was less substantial

compared to the experimental group, and the decrease in standard deviation indicates less score variability.

Table 10. The Learners' Means Prior to and After the Experiment

	Experimental Group				Control Group			
	Mean (Pre)	Std. D	Mean (Post)	Std. D	Mean (Pre)	Std. D	Mean (Post)	Std. D
Critical Cultural Awareness	3.36	2.37	6.29	1.951	1.95	2.02	3.88	1.46

4.4.2. Between- and Within-Group Development

Table 11 presents the results of the independent-sample t-test comparing the development of CCA between the experimental group and the control group (CG) before and after the treatment.

Table 11. Between-Group Developments in the Area of Critical Cultural Awareness (Independent-Samples t-Test)

Treatment	Group	Mean	t	df	Mean Diff.	Sig (2-tailed)	H ₀
Critical Cultural Awareness							
Pre-treatment	EXG	3.36	3.103	97	1.40	.003	Rejected
	CG	1.95					
Post-treatment	EXG	6.29	6.738	97	2.40	.000	Rejected
	CG	3.88					

The findings showed a difference between the students' means in the sample groups. In light of the pre-treatment analysis, the mean score for critical cultural awareness in the experimental group (M = 3.36) was significantly higher than that of the control group (M = 1.95), with a mean difference of 1.40. Based on the t-test results, this difference was observed to be statistically significant, $t(97) = 3.103$, $p = .003$. Since the significance value was less than .05 (Sig = .003 < .05), the null hypothesis is rejected, indicating a notable initial difference between the groups. The post-treatment analysis revealed that the experimental group's mean score increased to 6.29, considerably higher than the control group's mean score of 3.88, with a mean difference of 2.40 between the sample groups. This difference was reported by the t-test to be statistically significant, $t(97) = 6.738$, $p = .000$. In this respect, the p-value was less than the critical value of .05, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. On the whole, the significant p-values in both the pre-test and post-test, along with the larger mean difference observed after the treatment, underscore the effectiveness of the treatment in enhancing CCA within the experimental group.

Based on the descriptive statistics, the sample groups made progress in relation to CCA in the post-test. Nevertheless, to ascertain that such progress was statistically significant, a paired sample t-test was conducted (see Table 12 below).

Table 12. Within-Group Developments in the Area of Critical Cultural Awareness (Paired-Samples t-Test)

Group	Treatment	Mean	t	df	Mean Diff.	Std. D	Sig (2-tailed)	H ₀
Critical Cultural Awareness								
EXG	Pre-treatment	3.36	-7.877	55	-2.929	2.782	.000	Rejected
	Post-treatment	6.29						
CG	Pre-treatment	1.95	-6.352	42	-1.930	1.993	.000	Rejected

Thus, at the level of within-group development, with a mean difference of 2.92, the results indicated that the students' improvement was significant in the experimental group, $t(55) = -7.877$, $p = .000$. For the magnitude of this difference, a large effect size was observed, estimated at $d = -1.05$. As for the control group, the progress made was also significant at an estimated mean difference of 1.93, $t(42) = -6.352$, $p = .000$. Although both groups showed significant improvements, the larger mean difference and t-value in the experimental group suggest that the students' CCA in the experimental group improved significantly in comparison with that of the students in the control group. This indicates that the treatment had a more notable impact on the learners' CCA in the experimental group.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed that students' intercultural knowledge improved in the experimental group compared to the control group after the experiment. Both groups started at almost similar levels, but the experimental group made much greater progress after the course. In light of the post-treatment analysis, it was found that the difference between the sample groups was statistically significant in the post-test. The students in the experimental group developed a stronger knowledge of American culture, followed by Moroccan culture and Moroccan-American relations. They learned about communication styles, social systems, and historical connections between cultures. This suggests that the course helped students build not only isolated facts but also meaningful and connected cultural knowledge. The use of comparison and discussion in the course supported this development. These findings are consistent with previous studies (e.g., Karras, 2017; Tuncel & Paker, 2018) which show that intercultural courses improve cultural knowledge. However, the results differ from Echcharfy and Erguig (2020), where students improved more in knowledge of their own culture (i.e., Moroccan culture).

Similarly, the results obtained regarding intercultural skills also show strong improvement in the experimental group. It was observed that students in the experimental group outperformed students in the control group in skills of interpreting and relating as well as skills of discovery and interaction. This finding was also confirmed by the independent t-test analysis, which showed a statistically significant difference between the two groups, and the paired samples t-test confirmed that the improvement within the experimental group was statistically significant. After the treatment, students' ability to communicate appropriately in real-life intercultural situations improved. Moreover, they were able to identify cultural bias, explain misunderstandings, and mediate between different cultural perspectives through the combination of knowledge and positive attitudes such as openness and respect. This supports Byram's (1997) idea that intercultural skills depend on both knowledge and attitudes. The findings are congruent with studies by Echcharfy and Erguig (2020) and Tuncel and Paker (2018) which highlighted the role of intercultural tasks in developing students' intercultural skills. At the same time, the results partly challenge El Hiani (2018), because they show that positive attitudes and knowledge together can improve intercultural skills.

Concerning the development of the critical cultural awareness dimension of ICC, the results showed that the experimental group improved significantly compared to the control group. In light of the post-treatment analysis, the independent samples t-test revealed a significant difference between the two groups, and the paired samples t-test showed that the experimental group's development was statistically significant. This implies that the course was effective in developing this dimension of ICC among students. In this respect, the experimental group demonstrated the ability to recognise and interpret values in events from both their own and other cultures, to assess events based on different perspectives, practices, and cultural products, and to engage and mediate effectively in intercultural exchanges by combining their knowledge, skills, and attitudes. In this regard, students were able to analyse

cultural events such as religious celebrations by considering social, historical, and economic factors, rather than simply describing them. The results of the present study are consistent with previous studies which found that intercultural courses improve critical awareness (e.g., Karras, 2017; Devenci et al., 2021). However, they differ from Echcharfy and Erguig (2020), where only small improvements were found. This suggests that the design and depth of the course play an important role in developing students' critical cultural awareness.

In brief, the greater improvement observed in the experimental group compared to the control group indicates that the course Intercultural Communication contributed positively to the development of students' ICC. However, the results should be interpreted with some caution since the experimental and control groups were drawn from two different universities. That is to say, institutional differences may have influenced the post-test results. Therefore, future research should address this limitation by using groups from the same institution.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the present study provide empirical support for the effectiveness of the Intercultural Communication course in fostering students' intercultural communicative competence, and they yield valuable pedagogical implications. Overall, it is concluded, based on the results obtained, that the null hypotheses should be rejected, as students who were exposed to the course Intercultural Communication outperformed those who were not across the knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness dimensions of ICC. This, therefore, reinforces the argument that ICC does not emerge as a mere unintended outcome of language learning but is instead developed through intentional and systematically designed pedagogical practices.

The most remarkable developments were observed in the dimensions of intercultural knowledge, especially with regard to American culture, skills of interpreting and relating, which indicate an enhanced capacity to decentre, identify ethnocentric biases, and mediate intercultural misunderstandings, and skills of discovery and interaction, which implies that learners exposed to intercultural pedagogy become able to navigate unfamiliar cultural contexts and engage in meaningful intercultural exchanges. However, the progress in critical cultural awareness remained moderate although it was statistically significant. This indicates that CCA represents the most demanding dimension of ICC and necessitates sustained, explicit, and critically oriented pedagogical intervention beyond short-term instructional frameworks.

In light of the results obtained in this study, several implications can be drawn. First, the results underscore the necessity of integrating ICC as a central, rather than subsidiary, component of EFL curricula. Moreover, they indicate that systematic exposure to intercultural content can significantly impact the development of learners' ICC. Consequently, the departments of English in Moroccan universities should incorporate ICC-oriented courses as a core component of their curricula.

Moreover, the findings indicate that students encounter challenges in developing the dimension of critical cultural awareness. This implies that curriculum design should go beyond knowledge transmission towards a more critically oriented pedagogy. Accordingly, learners should be engaged in analytical tasks that encourage them to question their cultural assumptions and engage reflectively with both their own and other cultures.

Furthermore, it is recommended that curriculum designers and educators adopt a theoretical framework which could serve as a course of action for intercultural teaching and assessment. To this end, Byram's (1997) model of ICC offers an appropriate and effective framework. It involves the key skills learners need to engage successfully in intercultural contexts and provides clear educational objectives for both teaching and assessing ICC. By

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employing such a framework, curriculum designers, syllabus designers, and educators can incorporate learners' own cultures, establish appropriate and attainable goals, evaluate intercultural awareness, address relevant cultural content, and implement techniques that effectively promote the development of ICC (see also Alrefaee & Al-Shammari, 2026, on methodological trends in technology-mediated pragmatics).

In addition, the findings highlight the importance of pedagogical alignment between objectives, content, and assessment. Unlike traditional summative assessment practices, which appear insufficient for capturing the complexity of ICC development, formative assessments such as portfolios, reflective essays, and group projects can provide a deep understanding of students' competencies. In this respect, Deardorff (2009) maintains that "for intercultural competence assessment to be truly effective, such assessment—and thus learner feedback—must be integrated as much as possible throughout the duration of the course" (p. 488).

In sum, the study affirms that the Intercultural Communication course constitutes a highly effective pedagogical intervention for developing students' ICC. However, it also reveals that achieving deeper levels of intercultural competence, particularly critical cultural awareness, requires a shift towards critically oriented and learner-centred pedagogies.

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