



English Language Learning and Cultural Identity among Moroccan University Students: A Case Study of Mohammed First University

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Abstract

The growing prominence of English as a global language has attracted increasing scholarly interest in its influence on cultural identity and intercultural communication. In the Moroccan context, English has gained considerable importance within higher education, particularly among students seeking greater access to global academic and professional opportunities. This study investigates the relationship between English language learning and cultural identity among undergraduate students at Mohammed First University in Oujda, Morocco. Specifically, it examines how learning English influences students' perceptions of Moroccan cultural identity, attitudes toward globalization, and intercultural awareness. This quantitative study used a structured questionnaire administered to 200 undergraduate students enrolled in the English Studies program at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Mohammed First University. Participants were selected using a simple random sampling technique and represented all undergraduate levels from Semester One (S1) to Semester Six (S6). The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods. The findings reveal that most students do not perceive English language learning as a threat to their Moroccan cultural identity. Instead, English is viewed as a means of academic advancement, international communication, and cultural enrichment. The results further indicate positive attitudes toward globalization and a high level of intercultural awareness among participants. Exposure to English language and culture appears to encourage openness toward cultural diversity while reinforcing appreciation for local cultural values and traditions. The study concludes that English language learning and Moroccan cultural identity are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they coexist in a complementary relationship that promotes intercultural competence and global engagement while preserving local cultural belonging. The findings contribute to ongoing discussions on language, identity, and globalization within Moroccan higher education.

1. Introduction

The spread of English as a global language has become one of the most significant linguistic developments of the twenty-first century. Beyond its traditional role as a means of communication, English increasingly functions as a language of international education, scientific research, digital interaction, and professional mobility. As a result, the growing presence of English has generated important discussions regarding its influence on local cultures, national identities, and educational systems across different regions of the world.

In Morocco, recent years have witnessed a remarkable increase in interest in English language learning. While French has historically occupied a dominant position in education, administration, and business, English is gaining visibility among younger generations who associate it with academic opportunities, global connectivity, and access to international knowledge. This shift is particularly evident within Moroccan universities, where increasing numbers of students choose English studies and actively engage with English-language media, digital platforms, and global cultural products.

The expansion of English, however, raises important questions concerning the relationship between language and identity. Language is not simply a neutral tool for communication; it also carries cultural meanings, values, and ways of interpreting the world. Consequently, exposure to English may influence how students perceive themselves, their cultural heritage, and their place within an increasingly interconnected global environment. Some scholars argue that English promotes intercultural openness and global citizenship, whereas others express concern about its potential impact on local languages and cultural traditions.

Within Moroccan higher education, these questions have become increasingly relevant. University students frequently navigate multiple linguistic and cultural spaces characterized by the coexistence of Arabic, Amazigh, French, and English. Such multilingual realities create opportunities for intercultural engagement while simultaneously shaping students' understandings of identity and belonging. Despite the growing popularity of English in Morocco, limited research has explored how English language learning influences students' perceptions of Moroccan cultural identity and their attitudes toward globalization.

This study investigates the relationship between English language learning and cultural identity among students at Mohammed First University in Oujda. Rather than viewing language learning solely as an educational process, the study approaches it as a social and cultural experience that may influence students' perceptions of themselves and others. Particular attention is given to students' attitudes toward Moroccan culture, their engagement with global cultural practices, and the ways in which English contributes to the development of intercultural awareness.

By examining these issues within the Moroccan university context, this study contributes to ongoing discussions concerning language, identity, and globalization in higher education. It also provides insights into how students negotiate local cultural belonging while participating in increasingly global linguistic environments.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

- How does English language learning influence Moroccan university students' perceptions of their cultural identity?
- To what extent does exposure to English language and culture affect students' attitudes toward globalization?
- How does English language learning contribute to the development of intercultural awareness among students at Mohammed First University?
- Do students perceive English as a complement to Moroccan cultural identity or as a challenge to it?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Language, Identity, and the Construction of Self

The relationship between language and identity has long occupied a central position in sociolinguistic and cultural studies. Early scholarship challenged the notion that identity is fixed or predetermined, emphasizing instead its dynamic and socially constructed nature. Hall (1990) argues that cultural identity should be understood as a process of becoming rather than a state of being. According to this perspective, individuals continuously negotiate their

identities through interaction with social, cultural, and historical contexts. Language plays a crucial role in this process because it serves not only as a means of communication but also as a medium through which people express belonging, values, and cultural affiliations.

Similarly, Norton (2013) contends that language learning involves identity investment. Learners do not simply acquire linguistic knowledge; they also engage with new social realities and imagine new possibilities for themselves. Through language learning, individuals gain access to symbolic resources that may reshape their aspirations, relationships, and self-perceptions. This perspective is particularly relevant in the context of English language learning, where mastery of the language is often associated with academic achievement, professional mobility, and global participation.

Recent studies continue to support the close relationship between language learning and identity development. For example, Rose and McKinley (2020) found that university students frequently associate English proficiency with personal empowerment and international engagement. Likewise, Yazan and Rudolph (2023) argue that learners actively negotiate multiple identities while studying English, balancing local cultural values with emerging global orientations. These findings suggest that language learning is not merely an educational activity but also an identity-forming experience that influences how students perceive themselves and their place in the world.

2.2 English as a Global Language in the Era of Globalization

The rapid spread of English has transformed educational systems across the world. Crystal (2003) describes English as the first truly global language due to its extensive use in international communication, business, science, technology, and higher education. The increasing importance of English has encouraged universities to strengthen English language programs and to prepare students for participation in a globalized society.

The global dominance of English, however, remains a subject of debate. While some scholars view English as a valuable tool for intercultural communication and international cooperation, others raise concerns regarding linguistic and cultural inequality. Phillipson's (1992) theory of linguistic imperialism argues that the worldwide spread of English may reinforce existing power structures by privileging certain languages and cultures over others. This perspective highlights the potential tensions between globalization and cultural preservation.

More recent research presents a more nuanced picture. Fang and Baker (2021) argue that English should no longer be viewed exclusively as a language belonging to native speakers but rather as a global resource used by diverse communities. Similarly, Galloway and Numajiri (2020) found that many university students perceive English as a means of accessing global opportunities without necessarily abandoning their local cultural identities. These findings suggest that English can function simultaneously as a global language and a vehicle through which local identities are reinterpreted rather than replaced.

In Morocco, the growing popularity of English has generated similar discussions. Studies indicate that many Moroccan students increasingly associate English with international mobility, academic advancement, and professional success. At the same time, they continue to express strong attachment to their cultural and national identities, demonstrating that globalization does not automatically result in cultural homogenization.

2.3 English Language Learning and Intercultural Awareness

The connection between language learning and intercultural competence has been extensively explored within educational research. One of the most influential contributions comes from Byram (1997), who argues that successful language learning extends beyond linguistic competence to include intercultural communicative competence. According to Byram, learners must develop the ability to understand cultural differences, challenge stereotypes, and engage in meaningful intercultural dialogue.

Byram's model remains highly influential in contemporary research because it emphasizes the importance of critical cultural awareness. Language learners are encouraged not only to

learn about other cultures but also to reflect on their own assumptions and perspectives. Through this process, they become better equipped to interact with individuals from different cultural backgrounds.

Recent studies have reinforced the significance of intercultural awareness in foreign language education. Porto and Houghton (2022) found that English language learning contributes to greater intercultural sensitivity and openness among university students. Similarly, Lee (2024) demonstrated that exposure to diverse English-speaking communities through digital media and online communication can promote empathy, tolerance, and cross-cultural understanding.

The emergence of digital technologies has further expanded opportunities for intercultural learning. Through social media, online communities, and virtual educational platforms, students encounter a wide range of cultural perspectives that extend beyond traditional classroom environments. Such experiences encourage learners to critically examine both foreign cultures and their own cultural assumptions.

Within the Moroccan context, however, relatively few studies have examined how English language learning influences intercultural awareness and cultural identity simultaneously. Existing research has largely focused on language policy, multilingualism, and educational reform. Consequently, there remains a need for empirical studies that investigate how Moroccan university students navigate the relationship between English language learning, cultural identity, and intercultural competence. Addressing this gap is particularly important given the increasing prominence of English within Moroccan higher education and the growing internationalization of Moroccan universities.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research design to investigate the relationship between English language learning and cultural identity among Moroccan university students. Quantitative research was considered appropriate because it allows researchers to collect and analyze numerical data in order to identify patterns, attitudes, and trends within a specific population. According to Creswell (2014), quantitative research is particularly useful when examining relationships between variables and measuring participants' perceptions through standardized instruments.

The present study seeks to explore how English language learning influences students' perceptions of Moroccan cultural identity, globalization, and intercultural awareness. To achieve this objective, a questionnaire was used as the main data collection instrument due to its ability to gather information from a large number of participants within a relatively short period of time.

3.2 Sample

The participants in this study were 200 undergraduate students enrolled in the English Studies program at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Mohammed First University, Oujda. The sample included students from all undergraduate levels, ranging from Semester One (S1) to Semester Six (S6). Both male and female students participated in the study, allowing for a broader representation of the English department population.

A simple random sampling technique was employed to select participants. This method was chosen to ensure that all undergraduate students enrolled in the English Studies program had an equal opportunity to participate in the research. Random sampling helps reduce selection bias and enhances the representativeness of the sample, thereby increasing the reliability of the findings. According to Etikan et al. (2016), probability-based sampling techniques help reduce selection bias and improve the representativeness of research samples.

The decision to target students from the English department was based on the nature of the research topic. As learners who are continuously exposed to the English language through

Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence Through an Intercultural Communication Course

courses in linguistics, literature, cultural studies, communication, and language skills, these students constitute an appropriate population for examining the relationship between English language learning and cultural identity. Their academic experiences provide valuable insights into how engagement with English may influence perceptions of Moroccan identity, globalization, and intercultural awareness.

3.3 Instrument

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of four sections. The first section gathered demographic information, including gender and semester level. The second section focused on students' attitudes toward English language learning and the role of English in their academic and professional lives.

The third section explored cultural identity and students' perceptions of Moroccan cultural values and national belonging. This section was informed by Hall's (1990) understanding of cultural identity as a dynamic and evolving process. The fourth section examined intercultural awareness and attitudes toward globalization. Items included in this section were inspired by Byram's (1997) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence, particularly the dimensions related to cultural understanding, openness, and intercultural interaction.

The questionnaire consisted primarily of closed-ended items measured through a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). This format enabled respondents to express the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement. To ensure the reliability of the questionnaire, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated for the instrument. The overall reliability coefficient was 0.78, indicating an acceptable level of internal consistency among the questionnaire items. According to George and Mallery (2003), reliability coefficients above 0.70 are generally considered acceptable for social science research.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire was distributed electronically using Google Forms during the 2025–2026 academic year. Participation was voluntary, and students were informed about the purpose of the study before completing the questionnaire. A total of 200 valid responses were collected and included in the analysis.

The collected data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to provide an overview of students' responses. The analysis focused on identifying patterns in students' perceptions of English language learning, cultural identity, globalization, and intercultural awareness.

The analysis aimed to identify whether greater engagement with English language learning was associated with changes in students' perceptions of Moroccan identity and their attitudes toward intercultural communication and globalization.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were respected throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the objectives of the study and were assured that their participation was entirely voluntary. They were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, no personal identifying information was collected. All responses were used solely for academic purposes, and the collected data were stored securely. By adhering to these ethical guidelines, the study sought to protect participants' privacy and maintain the integrity of the research process.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 English Language Learning and Cultural Identity

One of the main objectives of this study was to examine whether English language learning influences students' perceptions of Moroccan cultural identity. The findings indicate that most

respondents viewed English as a tool for communication and personal development rather than a threat to their cultural values. Approximately 72% of participants agreed that learning English had not reduced their attachment to Moroccan culture, while only a small percentage expressed concerns regarding possible cultural influence.

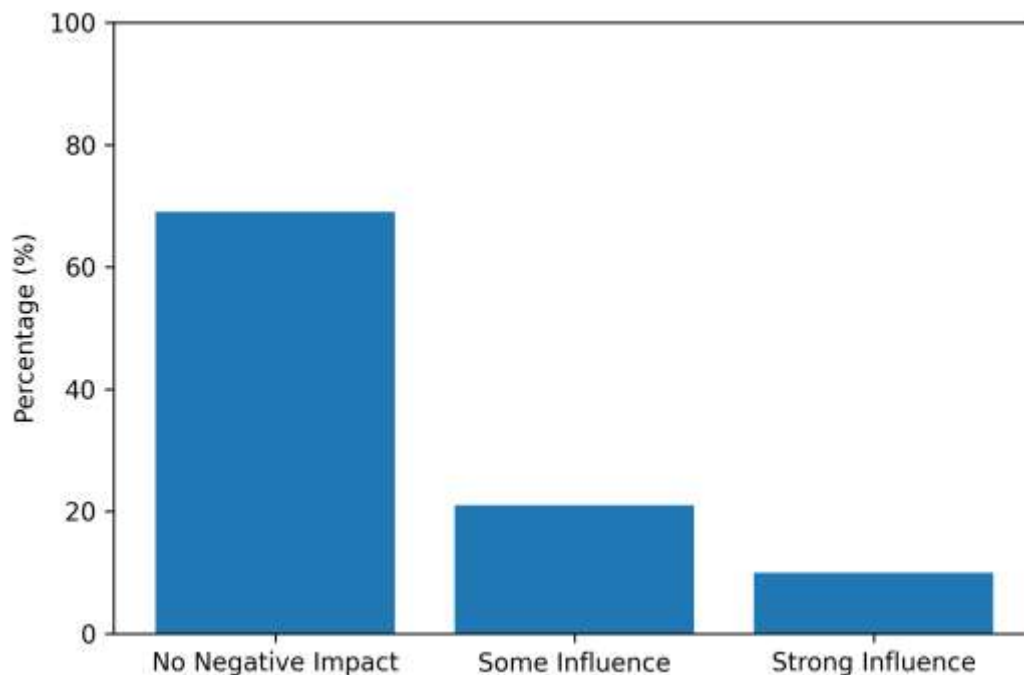


Figure 1: *Perceived Impact of English Learning on Moroccan Cultural Identity (N = 200)*

As shown in Figure 1, 69% of respondents indicated that learning English had no negative impact on their attachment to Moroccan cultural identity. Meanwhile, 21% reported that English had some influence on their perceptions of culture, whereas 10% believed that English significantly affected their cultural identity.

The responses suggest that English language learning and cultural identity are not necessarily competing forces. Many students reported that exposure to English enabled them to learn about other societies while simultaneously becoming more conscious of their own cultural background. Several respondents indicated that studying English literature, culture, and communication encouraged them to compare cultural practices and reflect on the distinctive characteristics of Moroccan society.

This finding supports Hall's (1990) argument that cultural identity is continuously shaped through interaction and representation. Rather than abandoning their cultural identity, students appear to negotiate new cultural experiences while maintaining a strong sense of belonging to their local context. The findings therefore suggest that English functions as an additional cultural resource rather than a substitute for Moroccan identity.

4.2 English Language Learning and Attitudes toward Globalization

The second objective of this study was to examine students' attitudes toward globalization and the role of English in facilitating global engagement. The findings reveal that most participants viewed English as an important tool for accessing international opportunities and connecting with the wider world. A large majority of respondents expressed positive attitudes toward globalization, while only a small percentage reported negative perceptions.

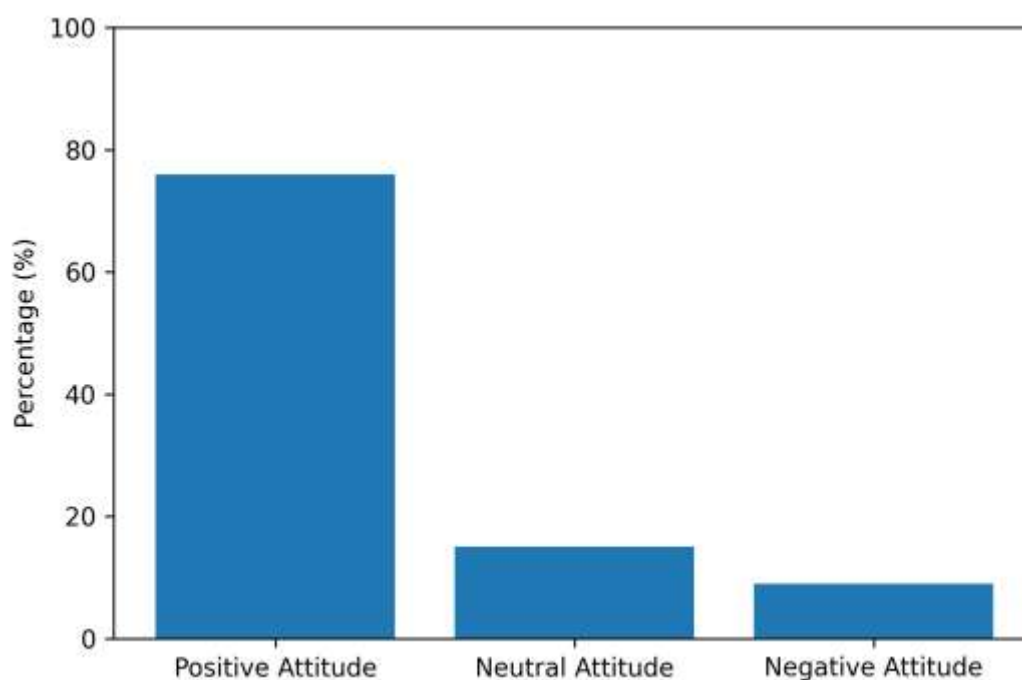


Figure 2: *Students' Attitudes toward Globalization through English Language Learning (N = 200)*

As shown in Figure 2, 76% of respondents demonstrated positive attitudes toward globalization and associated English with academic, professional, and intercultural opportunities. In contrast, 15% remained neutral, while 9% expressed negative attitudes toward globalization.

The findings suggest that students perceive English as a gateway to international communication and access to global knowledge. Many participants reported that proficiency in English enables them to access academic resources, participate in international programs, and communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds. These findings indicate that English is strongly associated with personal and professional development among university students.

At the same time, the results reveal that positive attitudes toward globalization do not necessarily imply a rejection of local cultural values. Most respondents emphasized the importance of preserving Moroccan traditions while engaging with global cultures. This finding suggests that students view globalization as an opportunity for cultural exchange rather than cultural replacement.

Despite the generally positive perceptions of globalization, a small number of respondents expressed concerns regarding the growing influence of foreign cultures on local traditions. Some participants believed that excessive exposure to global media and cultural products may contribute to changes in the cultural practices of younger generations. Although this view was not dominant among respondents, it highlights the continuing tension between global engagement and cultural preservation.

The findings are consistent with recent studies which argue that English serves as a global means of communication while allowing learners to maintain their local cultural affiliations. For the participants in this study, English appears to function as a bridge between local identity and global participation, enabling them to engage with international communities without losing their sense of cultural belonging.

4.3 English Language Learning and Intercultural Awareness

The third objective of this study was to examine the relationship between English language learning and intercultural awareness among students at Mohammed First University. The findings reveal that most participants believe that learning English has enhanced their

understanding of other cultures and improved their ability to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds.

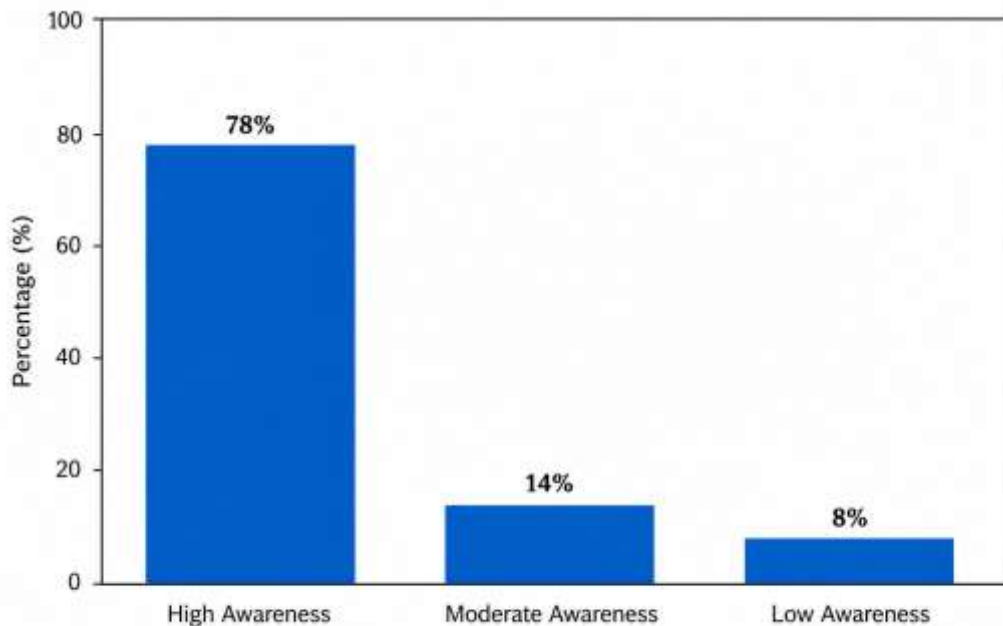


Figure 3: *Students' Intercultural Awareness through English Language Learning (N = 200)*

As shown in Figure 3, 78% of respondents reported a high level of intercultural awareness, while 14% demonstrated a moderate level of awareness. Only 8% of participants indicated a low level of intercultural awareness.

Many participants reported that learning English exposed them to different perspectives through literature, films, academic materials, and online content. Such exposure enabled them to gain a deeper understanding of cultural differences and encouraged them to become more open to alternative viewpoints. Several students also indicated that studying English helped them overcome stereotypes and develop greater respect for people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

This finding supports Byram's (1997) concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence, which emphasizes that language learning involves more than acquiring grammatical knowledge. It also requires learners to develop attitudes of openness, curiosity, and respect toward other cultures. The high percentage of students reporting increased intercultural awareness suggests that English language learning can play an important role in promoting intercultural understanding within Moroccan higher education.

Interestingly, many respondents noted that learning about other cultures also strengthened their appreciation of Moroccan culture. Rather than diminishing their cultural identity, exposure to cultural diversity encouraged students to reflect more critically on their own traditions and values. This suggests that intercultural awareness and cultural identity can develop simultaneously, allowing students to engage with global cultures while maintaining a strong connection to their local cultural background.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between English language learning and cultural identity among undergraduate students at Mohammed First University. The findings reveal that English language learning is generally perceived positively by students and is associated with increased intercultural awareness, openness to globalization, and broader cultural perspectives.

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Contrary to concerns that foreign language learning may weaken local cultural identities, the results suggest that most participants maintain a strong attachment to Moroccan culture while simultaneously engaging with global cultures through English.

The study further demonstrates that English functions as more than a communication tool within the Moroccan higher education context. For many students, it serves as a gateway to international knowledge, academic opportunities, and intercultural interaction. Exposure to English-language materials and cultural content appears to encourage students to develop greater understanding of cultural diversity while reflecting more critically on their own cultural values and traditions. As a result, students increasingly view themselves as participants in both local and global communities without perceiving these identities as contradictory.

Overall, the findings suggest that English language learning and Moroccan cultural identity can coexist in a complementary rather than conflicting manner. The study highlights the potential of English language education to promote intercultural competence and global engagement while preserving local cultural belonging. Nevertheless, the research remains limited to undergraduate students enrolled in the English Studies program at Mohammed First University. As these students voluntarily chose to specialize in English, they may hold more favorable attitudes toward English language learning than students from other academic disciplines. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted with caution and may not be fully representative of the wider Moroccan university student population.

Future studies may expand the sample to include students from disciplines such as science, engineering, law, and business to provide a broader understanding of the relationship between English language learning and cultural identity in Moroccan higher education.

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