Learning and Developing Intercultural Communication Competence

in Higher Education: Germany and Morocco as a Case

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Abstract: This paper aims to explore intercultural communicative competence (ICC) of B.A and M.A students of the English departments at Moulay Ismail University (Meknes, Morocco) and Bonn University (Bonn, Germany). It seeks to (a) compare the level of ICC among these participants and investigate the impact of abroad experience or intercultural communication learning on ICC development; and (b) to assess ICC after the completion of an intercultural communication course. The study uses a quantitative method based on a survey questionnaire. The findings of the research reveal the level of students' ICC performance, based on their own reflection, and the importance of integrating ICC in the curriculum. Moreover, this study will have implications to develop ICC in higher education from the respondents' results.

Keywords: Intercultural communication, ICC assessment, abroad experience, ICC perception, IC learning & teaching

1.   Introduction

Modern communication increases interaction through the use of new technologies which, in turn, urges learners to communicate with people who are geographically distant, and linguistically and culturally different. Priority is given to the educational system to prepare learners for the 21st century intercultural encounters and global interdependence. Linguistics, in general, and some of its branches, in particular, such as sociolinguistics and intercultural pragmatics, have highlighted the intertwined relationship between language and culture (Risager, 2007). Intercultural communication competence helps develop open-mindedness, diversity tolerance, mutual respect and acceptance. Although most teachers do not deny the importance of intercultural communication competence (ICC) in their teaching, few may actively assess students' intercultural learning outcomes. This might be because of the fact that teachers are uncertain whether they should assess linguistic competence or cultural competence, simultaneously or separately. In fact, some scholars argue whether intercultural learning can be explicitly tested (Kramsch, 1993). However, if we accept that learning a foreign language is learning a foreign culture, the course content should encompass an intercultural component. In this sense, learners should extend their learning capacity to develop sensitivity to different values, behaviours and attitudes of people of the other culture. It is mandatory, then, to specify ways to assess students' intercultural communication competence. Since the use of language is related to social and cultural values, language learning is considered to be a social and cultural phenomenon. Because the language helps the development of culture, language and culture are inextricably overlapped and should be treated holistically as much as possible (Fantini, 1997).

2.   Literature Review

2.1   Definition of Intercultural Competence, Intercultural Speaker, and ICC

2.1.1   The Learner Is an Intercultural Speaker

The process of teaching and learning a foreign language includes getting to know a new culture and the contact of the others who are nationally, racially, or ethnically different. Foreign language education is itself, by definition, an intercultural enterprise (Secru, L et al. 2005). The interaction with people from other cultures may be a challenge which has a twofold effect. This challenge may lead to a confrontational relationship, due to the incompatibility among encounters, or lead to acceptance where encounters are negotiating a cultural platform which is satisfying the self and the other (Guilhirme, 2000). Nevertheless, it has recently been criticised that foreign language teaching should move from the concept to reach native or near-native speakers to develop an intercultural awareness in order to overcome cultural diversity; rather than accept the norms of the monolingual (Kasper, 1995). Taking the native speaker as a model for communication competence is an impossible target for the learner who will inevitably end up frustrated. As Cook (1999) has put it, "the prominence of the native speaker in language teaching has obscured the distinctive nature of the successful L2 user and created an unattainable goal for L2 learners" (p. 185).

2.1.2   Defining Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC)

The term ICC is revised and introduced by different authors of other models of competence. It was introduced by Hymes (1972) as communicative competence based on grammatical and sociolinguistic competence. It was developed by Canale and Swain (1980) to grammatical, sociolinguistic and strategic competence. These concepts of competence are summarised in linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, socio-cultural competence and social competence by Byram (1997), who combined the communicative and intercultural competences in his model of ICC (p. 10).

   Intercultural communication is defined as a social process of interaction among individuals with different cultural backgrounds, who are either from different national cultures or different subcultures (Shibata, 1998). Intercultural communication refers to interaction between "people of two different groups [ethnics, beliefs, etc.] or cultures" (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005, pp. 155-156; Gudykunst, 2005). Based on this definition, IC occurs at two levels: interpersonal and intergroup. The first level is based on interaction of identities and relationships among individuals, whereas the intergroup level takes place in interaction of identities and relationships of the represented groups (Gudykunst, 2005). Communication competence, at the intercultural level, refers to "the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioral orientations to the world" (Spitzberg and Changnon, 2009, p.7). Knowledge and communication are intrinsically intertwined. The higher the level of knowledge, the higher the level of communication. Nevertheless, the more communication takes place, the more knowledge increases.

   Chen and Starosta (1998) believe that "intercultural competence is the only means whereby we can move beyond cultural differences in order to succeed in intercultural interactions". (p. 240)

The learner of a second or foreign language and culture does not cease to be competent in his or her mother tongue and the associated culture. Nor is the new competence kept entirely separate from the old. The learner does not simply acquire two distinct, unrelated ways of acting and communicating. The language learner becomes pluralingual and develops interculturality. The linguistic and cultural competences in respect of each language are modified by knowledge of the other and contribute to intercultural awareness, skills and know-how.

Council of Europe (2001, p. 43)

2.2   The Components of ICC

As presented in Figure 1, Byram (1997) identifies these components of ICC within foreign language in education: "savoirs" (Knowledge of Self and Other, of individual and societal interaction), "savoir comprendre" (skills of interpreting and relating), "savoir être" (intercultural attitudes), "savoir apprendre/faire" (skills of discovering and interacting) and "savoir s'engager" (critical cultural awareness).
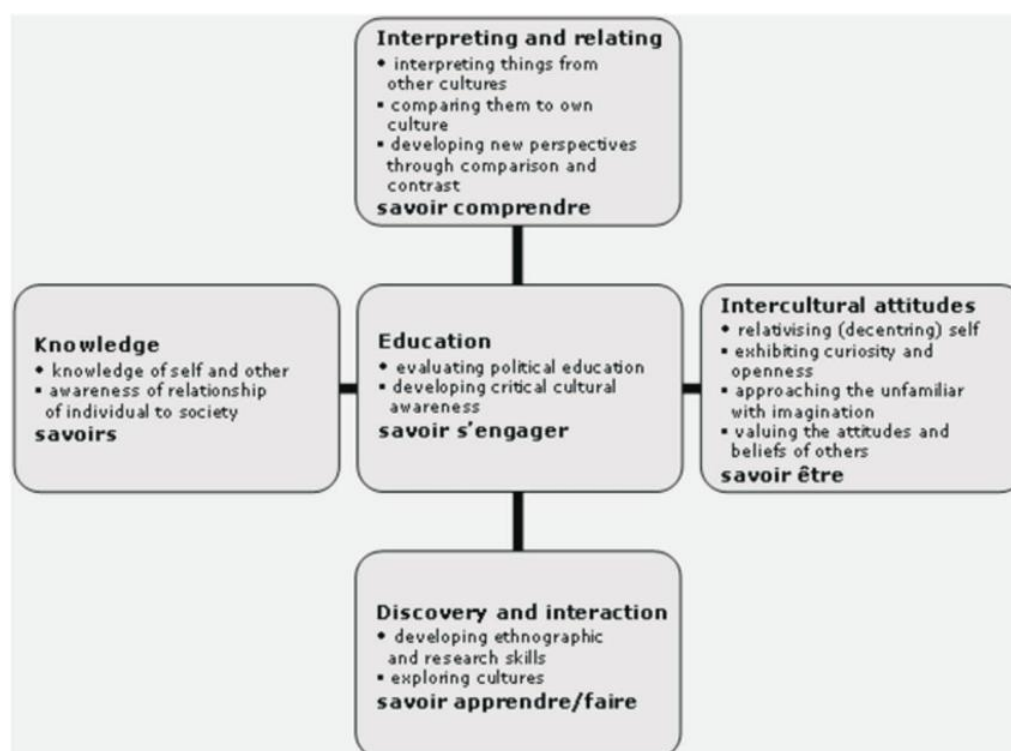

Figure 1. Model of Intercultural Communication Competence (Byram, 1997)

The success of an interaction relies basically on the effectiveness of exchange of information and the establishment of human relationships. Intercultural communicative competence requires the linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse and intercultural competence in a foreign language. In his model, Byram (1997) is concerned with the cultural, rather than the linguistic, skills and with the knowledge which enables the speaker to interact with culturally different interlocutors. The integration of the competence in foreign language is a main strength of Byram's model, unlike other scholars who only focus on intercultural competence. In his model, he introduces five components as follows:

a) Knowledge (savoir) of one's own cultural events and documents and the interlocutors'. It is the knowledge of social interactions at individual and societal level with great understanding of how social identities are acquired and how they shape people's mindset in addition to the procedural skills to act in different social circumstances accordingly.

b) Skills of interpreting and relating (savoir comprendre): The ability to interpret events and documents based on the developed knowledge and identify misunderstanding or ethnocentric aspects to understand the cultural differences. This competence depends on both the ability to interpret cultural events from another culture, explain it and relate to events in one's own, and the criticism of values of social groups who are culturally different.

c) Skills of discovery and interaction (savoir apprendre/faire): The skill to acquire knowledge und understand cultural aspects with the competence to interact with culturally different individuals and apply the knowledge, attitude and skills of interpreting and relating in real interactions accordingly.

d) Attitude (savoir être) of openness and readiness to relativizing the self and evaluating the other by suspending disbelief about the interlocutor's cultures and belief about one's own culture.

e) Critical cultural awareness (savoir s'engager): The ability to evaluate critically the explicit and implicit aspects of one's and others' cultural values and mediate in intercultural interactions.

3.   Methodology

3.1   Participants

The aim of this research is to investigate the ICC level among EFL participants in tertiary education based on their own judgement. A self-reflection questionnaire is used to elicit answers from respondents (INCA, 2004). A discourse completion test (DCT) was also employed to elicit information from respondents. The DCT was selected to develop understanding of the sociolinguistic aspects in the respondents' pragmatic performance. According to Kasper and Dah (1991), DCTs and role play are the most used instruments to collect data in pragmatic research. In this paper, light will be shed upon the quantitative results collected through DCT. The population under study is taken from tertiary contexts. Purposive-sampling is the technique used to collect data from participants of this study. This technique is often used when a researcher introduces questions which are addressed to the characteristics of a specific group's interest. For this purpose, one B.A. group and one M.A. group are from Moulay Ismail University and Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah in Morocco and one B.A. group from university of Bonn, Germany. As to the age category, 82% of the B.A. participants from the German university and 57% from the Moroccan university are between 18-21, unlike the M.A. participants where the majority (75%) are between 22 and 25 years old. The majority of participants in the three groups are female (68% M.A. and

57% B.A. from Morocco and 77% from Germany) where males are in a minority (23% M.A. and 43% B.A. from Morocco; and 9% from Germany), in addition to 14% non-binary gender in Germany. All participants from the German university are German except two individuals with Indian and Persian origins. Participants from Morocco are all Moroccan except one Dutch M.A. participant and an Ivorian B.A. participant. (See Table 1.)

Table 1. Demographic Background

	N	Group age %			Gender %			Nationality%	
		18-21	22-25	25+	Male	Female	Other		
Germany B.A	22	82%	14%	4%	9%	77%	14%	91 % German	9% Other (Persian-Indian)
Morocco B.A	72	57%	37%	6%	43%	57%	-	99% Moroccan	1 % Ivorian
Morocco M.A	20	5%	75%	20%	23%	68%	-	95% Moroccan	5% Dutch

3.2   Data Collection and Analysis

Participants were recruited during the winter term 2021-2022. To collect data of the participants' views, an online and an in-person questionnaire were employed in this study. Questionnaires are used as a powerful tool to collect data from a large number of participants (Hinds, 2000). Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, the researcher opted for an online questionnaire to collect data from participants of the German university because the whole term was run online. By contrast, the researcher was able to recruit participants from both Moroccan universities and collected data in-person. The study used the researcher-developed questionnaire with both open and closed items. The closed items category includes statements which conform to the Likert scale (1-very poor, 2-poor, 3-fair, 4-good, 5-very good) and (1. Agree, 2. Disagree). The open items category was used to elicit data from participants and develop understanding of the closed questions. However, this part is not going to be treated in this paper. The questionnaire was introduced in three sections. The first section is about general demographic information. The second section deals with the intercultural background and the last section investigates respondents' reflection and perception of ICC by rating statements, using Likert scale accordingly. This section is intended to elicit information from participants at the four levels of ICC: "knowledge", "skills", "attitude" and "critical cultural awareness",

Data was collected at one point of time from B.A. participants (of both universities) to gain an insightful view of their ICC level. M.A. participants, on the other hand, were pre-tested before taking an intercultural communication course and post-tested after the completion of the course. The data was gathered and analysed with the frequency tool SPSS.22.

Regarding the participants' intercultural background, it is disclosed that all respondents from the German university have been abroad whereas only a very few from the Moroccan university (7% B.A. and 30% M.A.) had the chance to go abroad. Most participants from both countries have contacts with people or friends abroad. It is also concluded that Moroccan participants (58% B.A. and 60% M.A.) have taken intercultural communication as a course in their learning experience, which is a higher percentage than German participants (9%). Very few participants in the three

groups have an international affiliation and have worked with foreign cultures of the English-speaking world. The results also show that most participants belong to a mono-culture family. (See Figure 2)
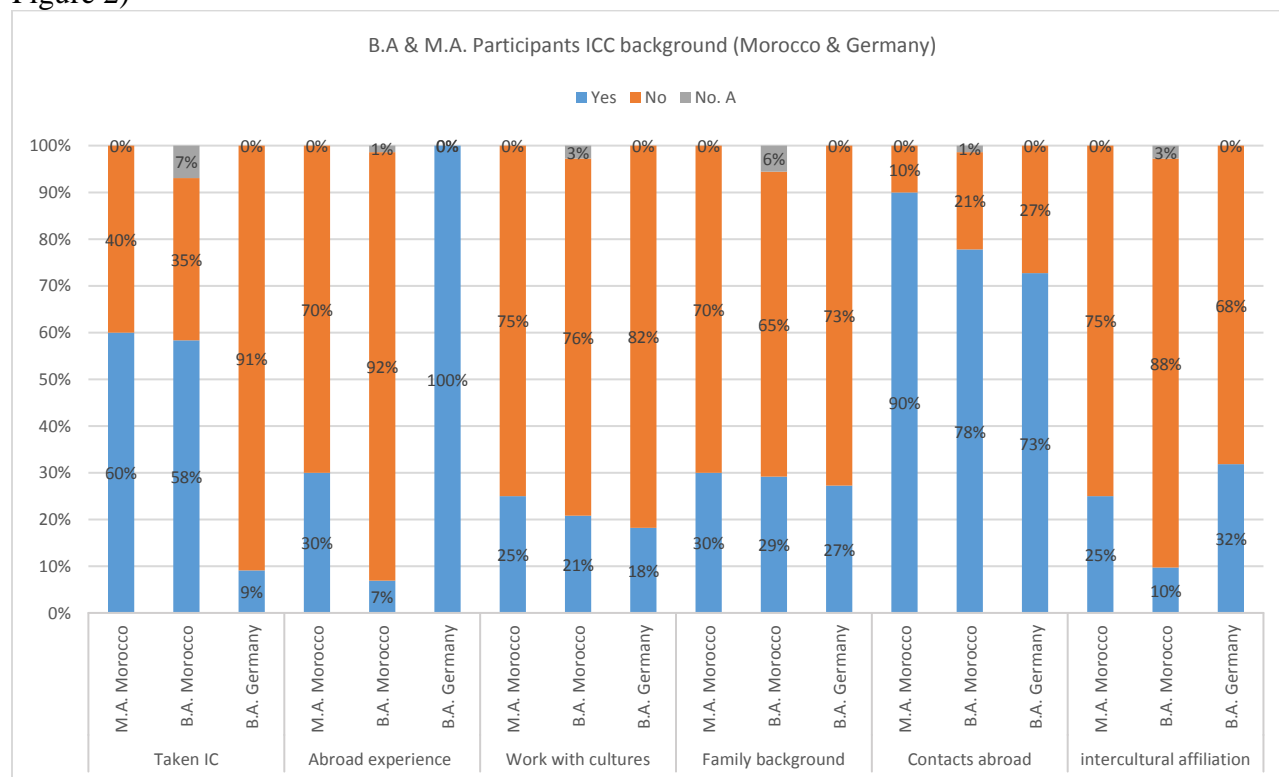

Figure 2. Participants' ICC Background in Morocco and Germany

3.3   Data Findings

3.3.1   B.A. Participants

3.3.1.1 Knowledge

Statements were given to participants to rate their perception of "knowledge" (from 1: very poor to 5: very good) to elicit information. This information helps the researcher to gain insights into the participants' readiness to develop knowledge in ICC. The results (Figure 3) show that the majority of B.A. participants in both universities rate their readiness to develop knowledge of social groups and their practices, by seeking contact with other cultures, as fair (33% from Morocco and 45% from Germany). 18% of respondents from Germany rate themselves as poor compared to 12% from Morocco. However, 18% from the latter B.A. perceive themselves as very good while this value is completely absent among the German participants.

3.3.1.2 Skills

82% of participants from Germany evaluate their ability to interpret and relate events across their own culture and the interlocutors' as fair. The rest are distributed among poor (9%) and good (9%).

60% of the Moroccan respondents reported this competence as fair, while 22% find themselves good at this skill and 18 % are poor. In both contexts, there is an absence of the extreme values: very poor and very good.

3.3.1.3 Attitudes

39% of the Moroccan participants perceive themselves as fair at being willing to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about their own, 30% as good and 7% as very good. In contrast, about 45% of the German participants are perceiving themselves as not having this attitude, 36% have fair attitude and only 5% rate themselves good at being open and curious to engage with otherness.

3.3.1.4 Critical Cultural Awareness

Respondents have reported their ability to evaluate critically, based on explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in their own and other cultures. The results show that 40% of the Moroccan participants evaluate their critical cultural awareness as fair, 29% as poor and 27% as good. Half of the German participants rate their cultural awareness as fair, 27% as poor and 23% as good. It is obvious that there is none who is very good at critical cultural awareness. The results show that the score of critical cultural awareness competence remains somehow similar among respondents of both countries.
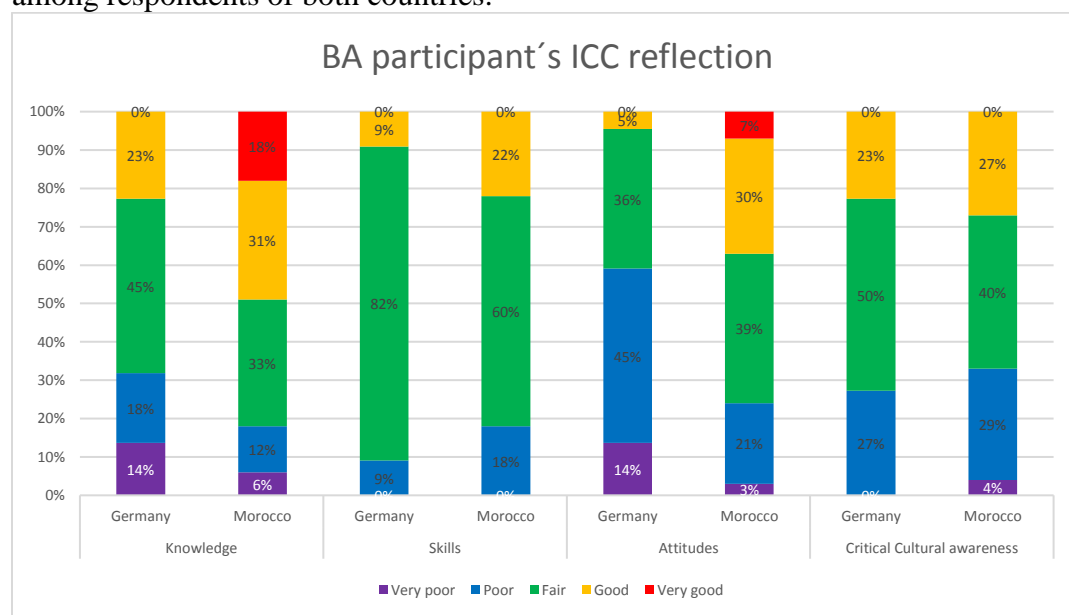

Figure 3. B.A. Participants' ICC Reflection in Germany and Morocco

3.3.2 M.A. Participants

3.3.2.1 Knowledge

It is shown, in Figure 4, that 60% (35% as good and 25% as very good) of respondents in the pre-test perceived themselves to be ready to develop their knowledge to learn as much as possible

about other cultures and the result remains the same in the post-test, too. Surprisingly, the number of participants who see themselves as poor in being ready to develop this competence has increased from 10% to 30%. It can be said that 20% of these participants seem to judge their willingness to develop knowledge as worse than they thought of themselves in the pre-test.

3.3.2.2   Skills

In the pre-test, 30% of M.A. participants think they are good at interpreting, relating, discovering and interacting with others and 50% report that their skills are fair. However, in the post-test, these figures change drastically to have 20% reporting "good" rate and 75% a "fair".

3.3.2.3   Attitudes

In contrast to the previous competences, M.A. participants' attitudes have been developed: from 10% to 20% report themselves as "very good" at being open to suspend disbelief about other cultures. After the completion of this course, 10% more of participants became curious and open to suspend cultural disbeliefs. The IC course can be a reason of developing their knowledge to adopt positive attitudes and to be ready to get rid of prejudices and enhance curiosity to relativise and value others' cultural values.

3.3.2.4   Critical Cultural Awareness

45% of the M.A. participants in the pre-test reported that they gain the competence fairly to evaluate cultural practices either implicitly or explicitly, but it turned out that the number increases to 65% in the post test. If 40% thought, in the pre-test, that their critical cultural awareness is good, in the post-test only 30% did so.
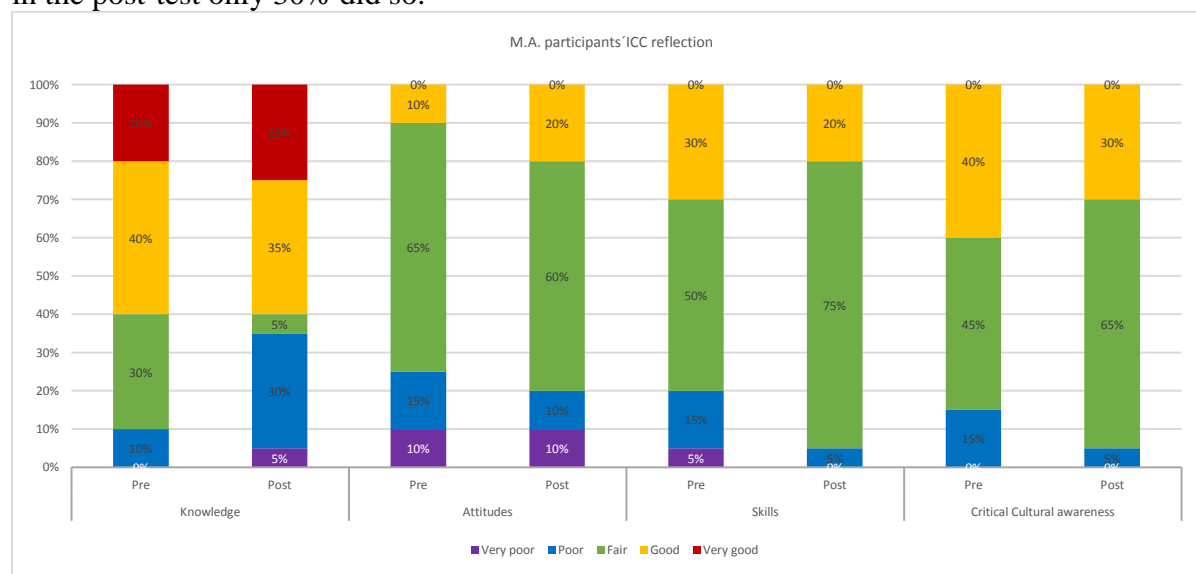

Figure 4. M.A. Participants' ICC Reflection

3.3.2.5   Scenario Attitude

Short scenarios were given to participants to investigate the extent to which their ICC knowledge and skills were manifested in an intercultural interaction and identified respondents' pragmatic performance. The scenarios are as follows:
Scenario 1:
    You lost one of your parents and your **American** friend (who lives in Morocco) did not come to visit you at home. He/she rather called you and said "Sorry for your loss!". His/her behaviour is surprising.
        o Agree
        o Disagree
Scenario 3:
You lost one of your parents and your **Moroccan** friend (you both live in the same city) did not come to visit you at home. He just called you. His/her behaviour is surprising.
        o Agree
        o Disagree
    The results show that participants are less surprised when the interlocutor is an American in both pre-test and post-test (85% disagree and 15% agree) (See Figure 5, Scenario 1). In contrast, 62% participants agree that the behaviour is surprising when it turns to have the same situation with a Moroccan interlocutor. Nevertheless, the degree of surprise seems to decrease in the post-test to 57% (See Figure 5, Scenario 3). Moroccan participants seem to accept and tolerate this behaviour from a non-Moroccan because he is not from the national culture and might not know about specific Moroccan practices. On the other hand, the same situation is not tolerated with a Moroccan interlocutor because he must be aware of the Moroccan rituals and it is impolite and shocking not to attend the funeral and show care and empathy.
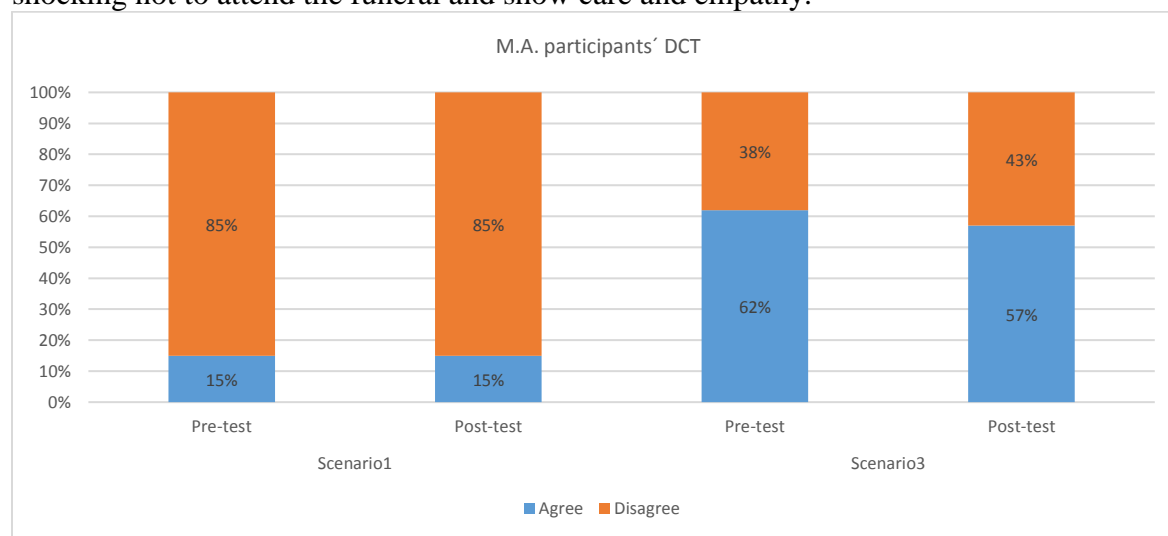

Figure 5. M.A. Participants' DCT

    This study tested the null (H_0) hypothesis that taking a course in intercultural communication has no effect on learners' ICC level and the alternative hypothesis (H_1) that such a course affects learners' performance. To analyse data, a t-test was conducted using paired samples.

Visually, it is clear that the course has affected respondents' results. The results (Table 2) show that after taking the IC course, the mean score of attitude and knowledge decreased while the mean score of skills and critical cultural awareness increased slightly. Statistically speaking, the difference among pre- and post-tests is not significant at four levels of intercultural communication competences (Table 3). This supports the null hypothesis. As a result, the alternative hypothesis is rejected.

Table 2. Means Analysis of M.A. Participants

	Test	Mean
Attitude	Test 1	3,0500
	Test 2	2,9500
Skills	Test 1	3,4750
	Test 2	3,6000
Critical Cultural Awareness	Test 1	3,6208
	Test 2	3,6375
Knowledge	Test 1	3,7000
	Test 2	3,4500

Table 3. The T-test of M.A. Participants

					Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)
Attitude	Pre-test & Post-test	0.10000	0.69962	0.15644	-0.22743	0.42743	0.639	19	0.530
Skills	Pre-test & Post-test	0.12500	0.61505	0.13753	-0.16285	0.41285	0.909	19	0.375
Critical Cultural Awareness	Pre-test & Post-test	-0.01667	0.53503	0.11964	-0.26707	0.23374	-0.139	19	0.891
Knowledge	Pre-test & Post-test	-0.25000	0.85070	0.19022	-0.64814	0.14814	-1.314	19	0.204

4.   Data Interpretation

The Moroccan B.A. respondents reported higher mean scores than the German respondents on knowledge, whereas they seemed to have a low score on the critical cultural awareness as a competence. It can be concluded that this group is ready to develop ICC knowledge by being open to other foreign different cultures. This group is willing to interact with others with the purpose to know as much as possible about their cultural values, historical relationships, national memory, social distinctions and processes of interaction and develop understanding of their own cultural practices. Nevertheless, a large number (29%) are not able to evaluate critically implicit and explicit aspects of cultural values in their own culture and other cultures and countries. In this sense, these participants need to step forward to be able to achieve an evaluative analysis and interpretation of documents and events of their own culture and others' cultures. It can also be concluded that B.A. Moroccan participants' score is higher regarding gaining skills to develop ICC "Knowledge" than the German participants due to the ICC learning experience. 58% of the

Moroccan participants have taken the IC course whereas only 9% from the German university had this chance, which helped the Moroccan participants to be ready to develop their knowledge.

For the M.A. students in general, ICC performance level seems to be rated by themselves as higher in the pre-test, in some aspects, than in the post-test. Most likely, before taking the IC course, the M.A. students had relied on their basic IC knowledge and their self-confidence allowed them to think they already possess a lot of ICC skills. It is possible that these learners took it for granted that, because they are M.A. students, they should be highly competent intercultural communicators. However, after they dived into the IC course content, they figured out that their competences still need refinement. Moroccan participants might be affected by their national culture which is characterized by uncertainty avoidance. As Hofstede (2023) concludes: "Morocco scores 68 on this dimension and thus has a very high preference for avoiding uncertainty". These participants tend to rate their competences as high as possible to avoid uncertainty and feel more secure. Nevertheless, students must have gained positive attitudes in dealing with speakers from other cultures and developed the competence to manage a frustrating situation by accepting the other and reduce the degree of shock.

Investigating IC teaching, teachers' perceptions and the syllabus are not covered in this paper. However, it is important to mention that the IC course which M.A. participants took is a module within a master program in "applied linguistics". In this sense, great focus is on teaching English as foreign language. Teachers attempt to shed light on the importance of IC awareness in EFL, but fail to dig into developing the four intercultural communication competences. Naturally, teaching objectives affect learners' performance. That is why the researcher decided to develop this study and look at the teaching strategies, the course content, and teachers' perception and qualifications to, hopefully, provide an insightful understanding of the contexts under study.

5.   Limitations and Recommendations

The major limitation of this study is that the responses are reflection-based self-evaluations. In the follow up to this pilot study, other research-based methods will be used to gain objective evaluation. "The validity of data of this type rests fundamentally on the presumption that respondents have the desire and ability to engage in valid self-assessment" (Ruben, 1989, p. 231). For the development of my research project, appropriate assessment approaches and models will be adopted in order to gain an insightful performance measurement.

Some of these limitations also rely on the quantitative research methodology. Quantitative data analysis does not give the researcher a comprehensive understanding of respondents' answers and performances. Moreover, this research did not provide insights about the teaching approaches and the teacher profile to combine some other factors or variables which could have affected the result. In this regard, further studies will develop this research to give a holistic view of participants' ICC performance using the quantitative data along with a qualitative approach. It would also be recommended that further research investigate the ICC level in tertiary education by providing a testing treatment and compare the results after the completion of the course accordingly.

This study can be considered exploratory in nature. The main objective of this research was to provide a pilot study to evaluate the data collection and analysis instruments and investigate the German and the Moroccan contexts to gain insights which will benefit my ongoing PhD project into this topic.

6.   Conclusion

The present study shows some interesting differences between German and Moroccan students concerning their self-evaluation. While German students tend to rate themselves as fair, Moroccan students rather evaluate themselves as good.

Moreover, the study showcased differences in self-evaluation of Moroccan students before and after having taken an IC course. The overall tendency was for students to rate themselves better IC communicators before having taken the IC class than after. This finding can actually be seen as a sign of success of the IC training: Students no longer take for granted that as M.A. students in a foreign language programme they are automatically skilled in IC, but see their limitations and their needs to work more on their intercultural competences. This can be seen as a positive development and as a prerequisite for students' continuing work to improve themselves.

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