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# Enhancing Students' intercultural competences through University Academic Training

**Mohamed Jaafari**

Sultan Moulay Slimane University, Morocco

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**ABSTRACT**

The present paper aims to exhibit the benefit of intercultural educational courses in enhancing university students' global understanding, tolerance, and inclusive social engagement. The paper displays the academic description, objectives, and implementation of the practices of the intercultural educational courses. The courses are inserted as major modules in undergraduate college studies. The case study analysed within this experiment relates to the module entitled "Intercultural Communication", which is part of a program that runs over three years entitled "Applied Languages in Culture" at Cadi Ayyad University, Marrakech, Morocco. The paper analyses quantitatively and qualitatively the attitudes and performances of undergraduate students having been trained in how to succeed in communication in extreme intercultural contexts where different religions, traditions, and beliefs are encountered. Homework tasks, tests, exams, cultural exchange, and student-oriented surveys are analysed and studied. The results produced by the immersion of intercultural courses in the university academic programs reveal that the graduated students succeed not only in being well integrated in their own cultural community but also in raising their chances of being hired in touristic companies where people from different cultures meet and interact. Such is the case of the graduates in intercultural communication taking place in Marrakech, which is a highly renowned touristic city.

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*Corresponding author: mo.jaafari@uca.ac.ma

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## Introduction

The need for the intercultural competence is as old in history as the human communities themselves, changing and acquiring new dimensions. For this reason, Tartaron Thomas (2014) "attempts to characterize current issues and debates surrounding the archaeology of cross-cultural contact from the Bronze Age to the end of the Classical period" (p. 1804). Because the Greeks navigated across different cultures, they created a democratic, cross-culturally comparative stance based on the relativity of civilisations and cultures "as much as they did with their own, in the space of free inquiry and critique opened up by the democratic polis" (Moutsios, 2021, p. 79). The Greeks' aim was to go beyond all types of cultural barriers in order to make their democratic, culturally diverse communities work. "Greek cultural relativity combined the acknowledgement of the universality as well of the particularity of the human condition." (Moutsios, 2021, p. 82).

Through history, the intercultural competence is a most sought for international diplomacy. "Diplomats, of course, have a long tradition of intercultural communication skills" (Slavik, 2004, p. iv). Successful diplomats nurture the competence of building bridges between differing cultures, their own and the host culture. They are expected to perform effectively according to divergent ethics and convictions, finding a middle ground to manage dialogues and settle conflicts.

Nowadays, developing the intercultural competence is a recurrent focus in a number of scientific studies and institutional projects. A key reference produced by UNESCO, The International Institution, reflects the critical importance of the intercultural competence in the globalized world. The digital document is entitled Intercultural Competences: Conceptual and Operational Framework (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2013). The book consists of a program designed to promote a range of intercultural competences as a requirement to approach cultural diversity and hence sustain mutual understanding between communities.

The intercultural competence paradigm has evolved and expanded to different societal sectors. Hence, the intercultural competence comes to be the objective of numerous academic disciplines around the world. Kohli, Huber et al. (2010) traces and reviews the historical and theoretical development of cultural competence in psychology and social work practice. Chloe Lane (2023) orients business school students to build their intercultural competence to stand "for top graduate business positions" in the internationalized modern work place since "the world of business, is becoming increasingly globalised".

Basing on the previous analysis, the value the intercultural competence is universally acknowledged in both the professional and communal fields; the strategy then to enhance youth's intercultural competence is education. For this reason, several researchers contribute to the work edited by Huber, Reynolds et al. (2014) and published by the Council of Europe. They propose categorized methods of developing intercultural competence through formal, informal and non-formal education. Align with these assumptions, many educators implement in university campuses academic projects on intercultural competence; they believe that

although there are numerous sites where students may gain intercultural and global competencies, from their personal experiences to exchanges on social media, educators must continue to explore whether what and how we teach is enabling the development of these competencies. (Garson, 2017, p. 57)

In answer to the question raised in the quote above, it is important to view the acquisition of intercultural competence as the outcome of the inclusion and incorporation of an assessed activity in the curriculum. The educators help students to go through a learner-centred process "to become competent and effective in their intercultural interactions, to integrate better in intercultural study groups, and to be generally positive about their intercultural experience" (Aston University, 2012, p. 4).

In this context, this paper exhibits our contribution to implementing intercultural competence communication in the university curriculum. An academic course is designed according to a theoretical framework and incorporated into the curriculum. The students are engaged into both learning, assessment and training. Before a detailed description of this experience, a study of the concept of 'intercultural competence', its definition along with the inherent components and systematic implementation should be the focus of the following section.

## Conceptual Framework

The present section highlights the meaning of the term 'Intercultural Competence' and its components inherent in the process of development, mainly culture and communication. Equally important in this section are the steps of implementation. This section reflects the methodology applied in the academic module entitled 'Intercultural Communication' integrated in the course 'Applied Languages and Cultures' as academic


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curriculum in the Faculty of Arabic Language, Cadi Ayyad University, Marrakech, Morocco. Accordingly, the content of the course, "Intercultural Communication," is structured in a way to introduce related components and their meanings. Therefore, the course sessions highlight the following issues in order of priority starting with the rational for studying the intercultural communication, defining communication, culture and culture components and types, competence and intercultural competences, then intercultural communication strategies and barriers.

## Intercultural Communication Study

The first session of the module sets the objectives for the course. The study of intercultural communication investigates the communication procedures in a context marked by cultural group membership differences. Hence, Intercultural Communication Course "is about acquiring the necessary knowledge and dynamic skills to manage such differences appropriately and effectively" (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005, p. 3). The focus of the course is to sharpen the students' competence to deal with diverse attitudes and behaviours in appropriate and effective manners. 'Appropriately' means suitable and respectful way, which is acceptable and appreciated by the interlocutor from a different culture, and 'effectively' means the way that helps to achieve the objectives of the communication endeavour. While the students are being trained to acquire principles, strategies and ethics of successful intercultural communication, they are also required to develop "a creative mind-set to see things from different angles without rigid pre-judgement" (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005, p. 3). The following sections exhibit the course components the students should be aware of at any instance of intercultural communication.

## Communication

The present section aims to reconstruct the trainees' comprehension of the communication process. The concept of communication is so familiar to the trainees. However, a review of the definition of the term and analysis of the inherent components is of paramount importance in the course. For, all the elements constituting the process are necessary for the success of the communication exchange.

The term "communication" refers to "a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behaviour" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In line with this definition, while interacting appropriately and effectively with others, one must be mindful to the different elements that constitute the communication process. Different definitions may focus on specific aspects and order of the process components such as Pearson & Nelson's view (2011, p. 10) that communication is 'understanding' and 'sharing' meaning. The first concept to consider is "process" which is a dynamic activity that keeps changing according to factors of time, social context and preconceptions, values. It is then hard to capture for description (Pearson & Nelson, 2011, p. 10). The key word in the process is to understand, meaning "to perceive, to interpret, and to relate our perception and interpretation to what we already know" (McLean, 2005, P. 10). Detailed analysis of the components of the communication process in its simplest form are highlighted figure one.

FEEDBACKINTERFERENCE = NOISE Figure 1. Communication process components FEEDBACKINTERFERENCE = NOISE Figure 1. Communication process components The Source visualizes, encodes, and sends the message either through verbal sounds, written script, sign or symbol system or other communication channel. "The message is the stimulus or meaning produced by the source for the receiver or audience" (McLean, 2005, p. 10). Encoding means Converting the sender's ideas and thoughts into a message such as words, sounds, colours, space and themes. The Code is a system of signals, gestures, words, sounds or symbols for communication. Channel or Medium "is the way in which a message or messages travel between source and receiver." (McLean, 2005, p.10). It is required for transmission of messages such as newspaper, emails, invoices, or face-to-face speeches or preaches other communication medium. "The receiver receives the message from the source, analyzing and interpreting the message in ways both intended and unintended by the source." (McLean, 2005, p. 10). Decoding is interpreting the symbols sent by the source through a channel.

Whether on purpose or accidentally, the recipient provides feedback when replying to the source on a message. Whether conveyed through verbal or nonverbal means, feedback signals enable the sender to gauge how effectively and accurately—or otherwise—the message was comprehended. Feedback also gives the recipient opportunity to ask for clarification, express agreement or disagreement, or suggest potential ways to render the message more engaging. As the amount of feedback increases, the accuracy of communication also increases (Leavitt & Mueller, 1951).

"The environment is the atmosphere, physical and psychological, where you send and receive messages" (McLean, 2005, p. 11). It refers to the surroundings, in which we communicate, both as the sender and the


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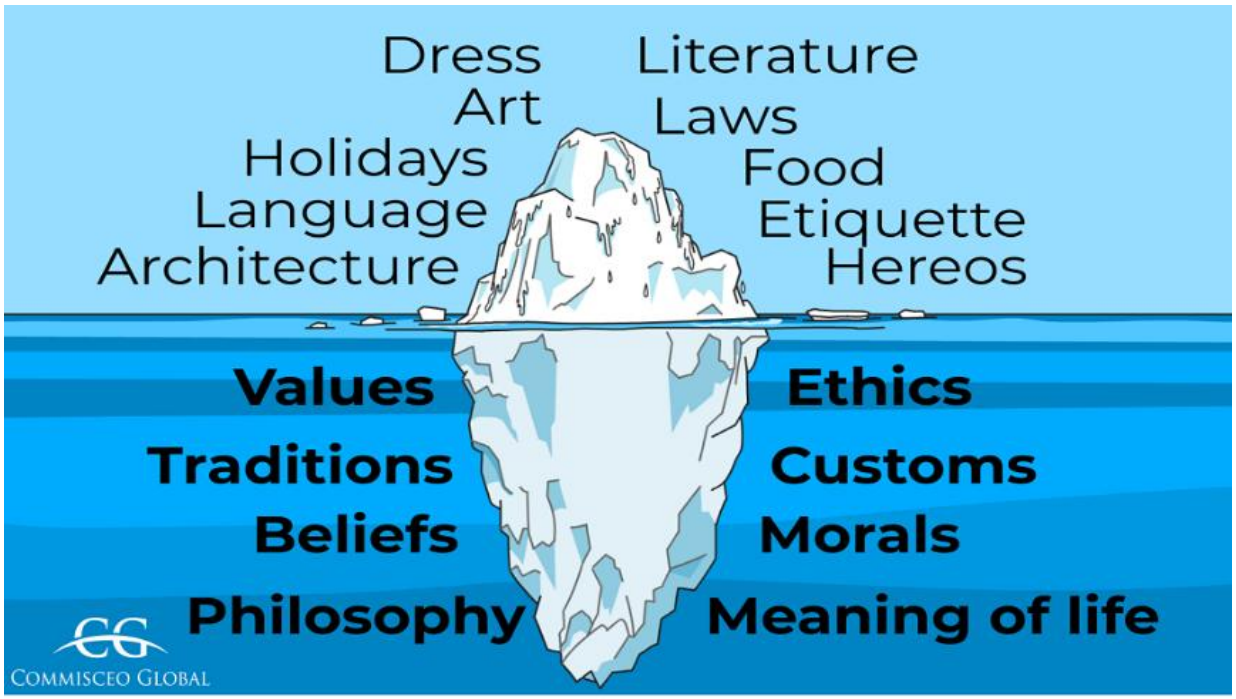
receiver of messages. It encompasses the setting, atmosphere, and conditions that may influence the interpretation and reception of information. Tables, lighting, and sound equipment, formal dress, window open and drifting air. All these and others impact the way one writes or articulates a message

"The context of the communication interaction involves the setting, scene, and expectations of the individuals involved." (McLean, 2005, p.11) In a professional communication setting, the use of formal dressing can directly or indirectly affect and orient the language and conduct expectations among the participants. In fact, 'environment' and 'context' are closely intertwined sharing the same cues and factors. Throughout the process of communication, factors may interfere and distort the meaning intended. "Interference is anything that blocks or changes the source's intended meaning of the message."(McLean, 2005, p. 11). 'Interference' is also called 'Noise' which can show up at any stage of the communication process.

Put in a nutshell, this concise investigation elucidates the intricate dynamics of the communication process, emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of its components and contextual factors to facilitate effective and meaningful exchanges. The presence of noise or interference throughout the communication process further highlights potential challenges that can obstruct or alter the intended meaning of a message.

## Culture Types and Aspects

In on-campus sessions, culture related issues and concepts are discussed and understood in the light of local and foreign cultures. In order to grasp the meaning of intercultural competence in communication, it is crucial to define first the key terms, 'culture', 'intercultural', and 'competence'. Subsequently, the debates converge on culture types, namely low and high context, polychronic versus monochronic and individualistic versus collectivist cultures.




Cultural studies have categorized culture into types, namely observable and non-observable, concrete or tangible and abstract or intangible. Edward T. Hall (1976), in his book Beyond Culture, differentiates between external or surface and deep or internal culture; the first type consists of things observable with taste, smell, touch and sound.

Examples of observable culture are food, behaviours, dress and customs in contrast with beliefs, values and priorities, which are examples of deep non-observable culture. These latter are implicitly learned, unconscious, subjective knowledge, and difficult to observe and change. Furthermore, culture types can be broadly categorised into low and high context, polychronic and monochronic, individualistic and collectivist cultures, each representing distinct sociocultural frameworks. Accordingly, in low-context culture prevailing in Western societies, people communicate information in a direct manner that relies mainly on words, rather than contextual elements (i.e., the speaker's tone of voice or body language). In contrast, people in high-context culture living in Asian and Middle Eastern societies lie heavily on implicit messages, indirect contextual cues


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(i.e., the situation and the speaker's tone of voice), and social relationships to relay information being communicated (Hall, 1976, p. 105).

People from monochromic cultures such as in North America and Northern Europe prefer to complete tasks sequentially, prioritizing punctuality; schedules are not flexible. People from polychronic cultures, on the other hand, focus on tasks or activities, not schedules. It is commonly observed in in much of the Middle East, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa. People are more prone to multi-task: for, tending to mix personal activities and work activities. Lastly, individualistic cultures, common in Western societies, place a strong emphasis on personal liberty, success, and personal objectives. Conversely, collectivist cultures, prevalent in Latin American, African, and East Asian societies, grant a higher value on interdependence, harmony within the community, and group harmony than they do on individual goals.

To sum up, culturally relevant topics and ideas are explored and comprehended in the context of both domestic and international cultures supported by videos and case studies. Such issues include low/high context cultures, polychromic versus monochromic and collectivist versus individualistic cultures. Understanding these cultural dimensions is essential for effective cross-cultural communication and cooperation in diverse global contexts.

## Intercultural Competence

For the purpose to achieve successful communication between different cultures, the interlocutors need to develop their intercultural competence. The term 'competence' refers to "the ability to do something successfully or efficiently". 'Competence' is interchangeable with 'proficiency', 'ability' and 'competency (skill)'. Nevertheless, prior to developing knowledge in foreign cultures, one should develop competence in home culture first. Hence, cultural competence is "recognizing, reflecting on and participating in on one's own cultural values, world view and their implications for making respectful, reflective/thoughtful, and reasoned/logical/coherent choices to be members within society". The cultural competence constitutes the building stone for intercultural competence.

The intercultural competence goes beyond mere recognizing and understanding of diverse customs and cultural norms; rather, it is "the ability to behave effectively and appropriately in interacting across cultures" (Martin & Nakayama, 2010, p. 47). For this reason, the intercultural competence calls for a genuine inquisitiveness, open-mindedness, and enduring efforts to bridge cultural gaps through effective and appropriate communication, responsiveness, and a willingness to adapt oneself to diverse perspectives and ways of thinking. Jackson (2012) claims that an intercultural competent individual is exhibits "flexibility, humour, patience, openness, interest, curiosity, empathy, tolerance for ambiguity, and suspending judgments, among others" (p. 271). In real contexts, an intercultural competent citizen is able to found and fortify relationships, to initiate and sustain communication without loss, and to engage in accomplishing mutual targets or needs (Jackson, 2012, p. 271).

## Intercultural Communication Strategies and Barriers

There are a number of strategies that can be employed and barriers to avoid to better improve intercultural communication competence. The guidelines listed below may help in any cross-cultural situation to make sure one's message and intention is clear, and that one understands others' speech, behaviour and attitudes.

Broadening and expanding one's knowledge helps the individual to be prepared to navigate intercultural encounters successfully. It makes sense to read and know about other communities' cultural norms, standards and communication ethics. In addition, one is required to be open-minded and non-judgmental about different cultural practices and beliefs. Likewise, one should be alert to, recognize diversity within the same culture, and treat individuals as unique rather than homogeneous. These are cultural nuances, which, if mishandled, can lead to offensive communication and strained relationships.

Attentive listening and observing is a highly regarded skill, especially when communicating with others from diverse cultures. Other people may hold varying ideas and attitudes, which may contradict one's own spectrum of beliefs and values. However, being attentive and acknowledging the potential differences in ideas and attitudes, helps approach such situations with openness, positive responses, and respectful inquiries.

Asking open-ended questions, instead of yes or no questions, helps avoid confusion. It is regarded as a practical communication strategy to foster interaction and clarity, steering clear of potential confusion that may arise from yes or no inquiries. For, open-ended questions engender interaction, requiring explanation, outlining point of views, and reiteration of assumptions, making it easier for the interlocutors to understand responses and the context surrounding them.


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Considering nonverbal cues such as intonation, eye contact and posture is equally a strategy that contribute to the success of communication. Adapting to the communication styles of others, recognizing that these cues can vary across cultures and what may be acceptable in one culture might be uncomfortable in another. For example, it is not unanimous to all cultures to keep strong eye contact while speaking. It may be very uncomfortable.

Individuals can enhance their intercultural communication competence, fostering positive and meaningful interactions across diverse cultural contexts. To do this, citizens should be mindful to incorporate communication strategies in their interaction with people from diverse cultures. They should also avoid common barriers to sustain such communication.

## Students' Experiential Learning

This section pertains to the students' experiences in real intercultural social encounters subsequent to receiving training in intercultural communication strategies. The activities range from cultural exchange to gardening, theatre and festival participation. These activities are an opportunity for the students to implement what they have learned in class lectures. The foreign people involved in these activities are participating in international events organized in Marrakech by third parties or organizations.

### Cultural Exchange



**Environment, art and scientific activities**



The students submit the following excerpts. They tell about experiences they had with people of different cultures. One of the students participated in a Storytellers Festival organized in Marrakech and engaged in discussions with the storytellers, " For me, the most important experience I have had, which is still going on, is dealing with storytellers from different countries of the world, which makes me open to various cultures". Another student reports on a deeper instance of cultural encounter related to mixed marriage, "I have a French brother-in-law, his frankness and his way of saying no without looking for an excuse shocks me sometimes but after the course of highly context culture and low context culture I became much more understandable". In the same way, a student tells about a similar case, "the husband of my sister in law is from Netherlands. I understand better his silence in some situations".

## Student Mobility

Student mobility to different countries where people's way of life differ from home country culture is one of the most effective strategies for students to develop and enhance their intercultural competence. The case we have at the Faculty of Arabic Language is the story of an incoming mobility student from Germany, Chiara Bovio. She is officially granted a scholarship to spend and officially study for two terms in "Langues Appliquées à la Culture". In class, while discussing intercultural

encounters and communication strategies, students relate about their experience with the incoming young student from Germany. Under the title "International Communication - a Lesson for a Lifetime", Chiara writes a report on her experience at the Faculty of Arabic Language. She highlights the impact of the course on her experience as a foreign student. Below is her text she writes purposefully for the present research:

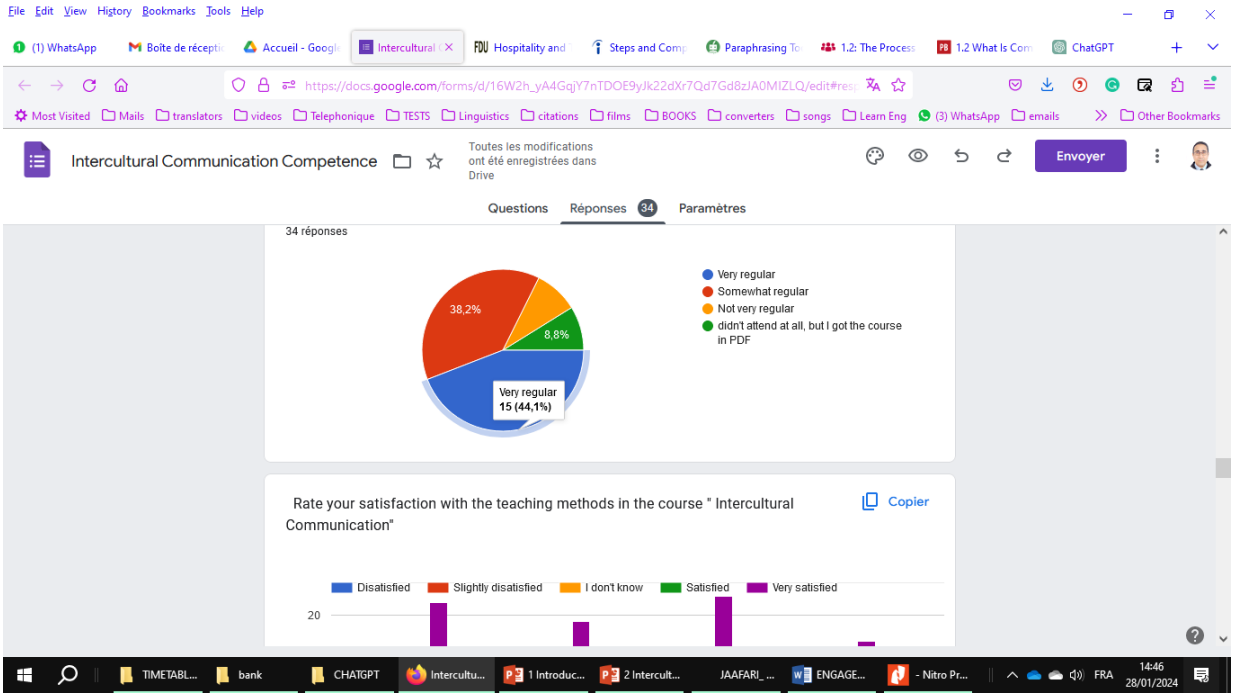
I have the incredible opportunity of spending an entire university year in Marrakesh at the faculty of Arabic languages in the field "Cultural application of language".

One of the modules I took last semester was called 'international communication' with the lovely Mr. Jaafari. In this class we learned why internal communication is important, especially in the cultural sector, and also how to successfully have intercultural conversations. Mr. Jaafari's class helped me not only in continuing my education on subjects related to my studies, but also helped me navigate my communication skills, build important friendships and make valuable connections with so many wonderful people inside and outside of the faculty. Having this course alongside my other modules felt like a specialized coaching that allowed me to think about intercultural relationships, whether in a personal or more commercial setting, in a different and more differentiated way. Realizing how communication differs between high context and low context cultures for example, was a very valuable lesson to me. Having this knowledge about other countries one might come in contact with is extremely helpful because it allows a deeper sense of understanding and respect for certain customs or habits one otherwise might not be aware of. Learning about Moroccan customs in this class, simply by listening to our professor talking about examples or using personal experiences for reference, helped me understand so many things and get accustomed to differences in communication I might not have known exactly how to handle without this class. Having grown up in Germany, there are a few differences I noticed after arriving in Marrakech, such as more indirect communication, different perceptions of time or a stronger sense of personal connection. Talking about these differences in class and understanding where to place them within the cultural context made me feel more connected to my surroundings and the people I have met along the way.

In my opinion, learning about intercultural communication is extremely valuable in any professional or personal field, but particularly in the culture sector where respectful communication between different nations is crucial for successful cooperation and cultural exchange. Being more aware about the skills that can lead to a good intercultural connection and using them in my daily life has given me more confidence throughout my exchange and I am sure it will help me for any future interactions I may have.

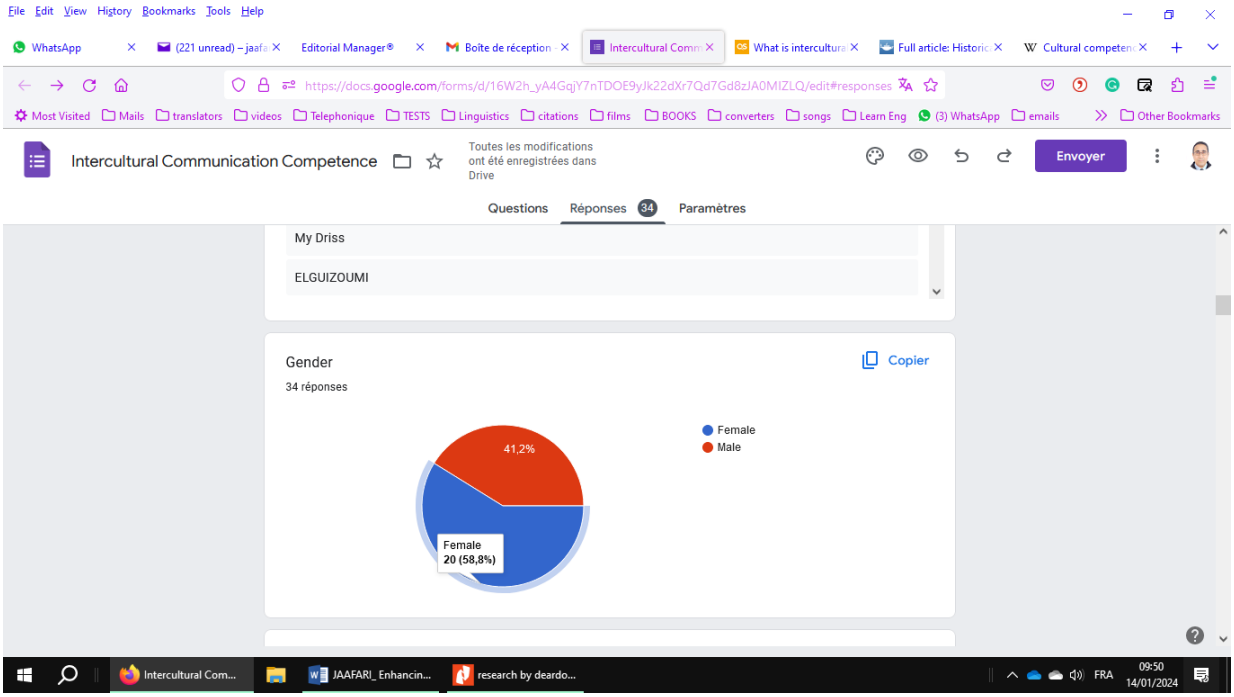
Thank you for sharing your knowledge with so much passion and an ever-lasting smile on your face. Chiara Bovio, 6 January, 2024

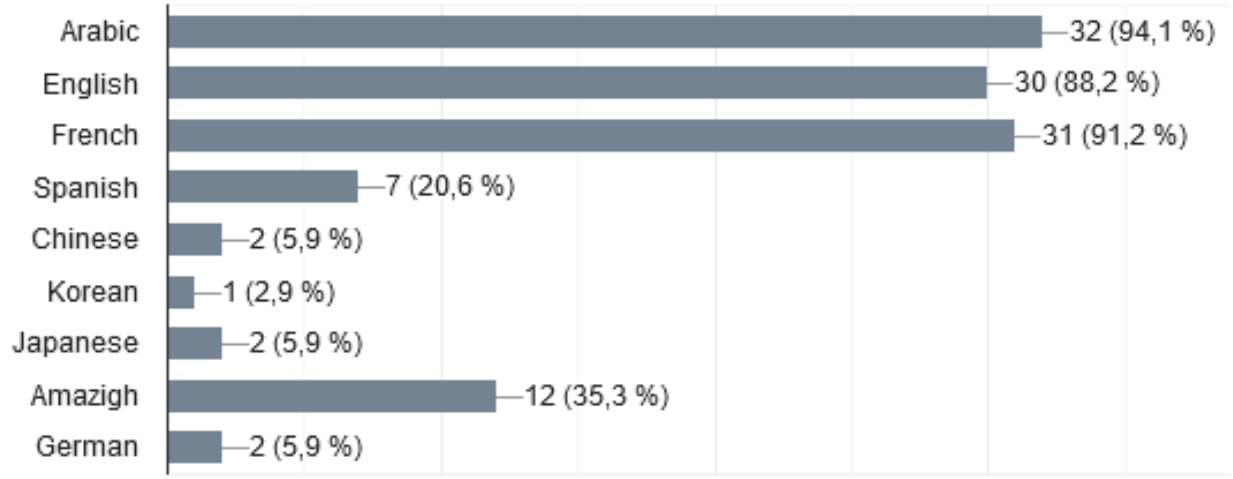
## Students' Evaluation of the Course




The questionnaire is entitled "Intercultural Communication Course Assessment", that is the course is assessed by the learners. In the introduction of the questionnaire, the students are presented with the

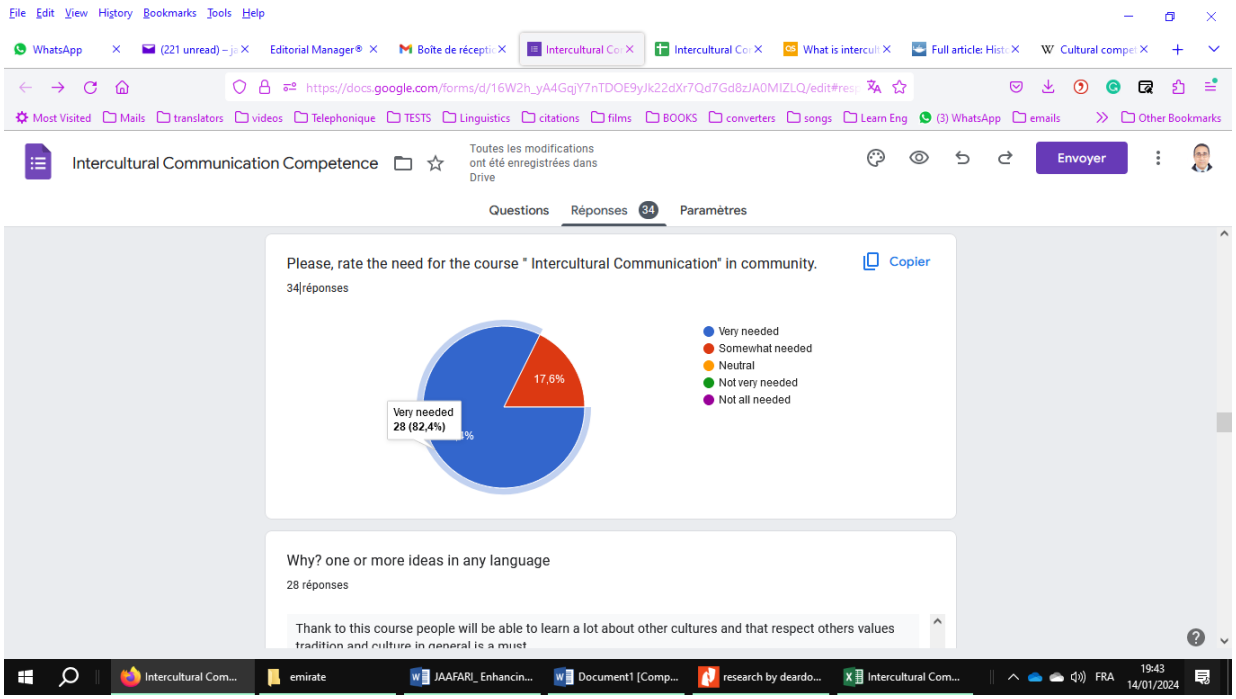
objectives behind constructing the questionnaire. The first objective is to collect the students' evaluation of the course and its components; the second objective is to map out the impact of the course/training on the students' personality and attitudes towards foreign cultures, faiths, beliefs, traditions and behaviours.

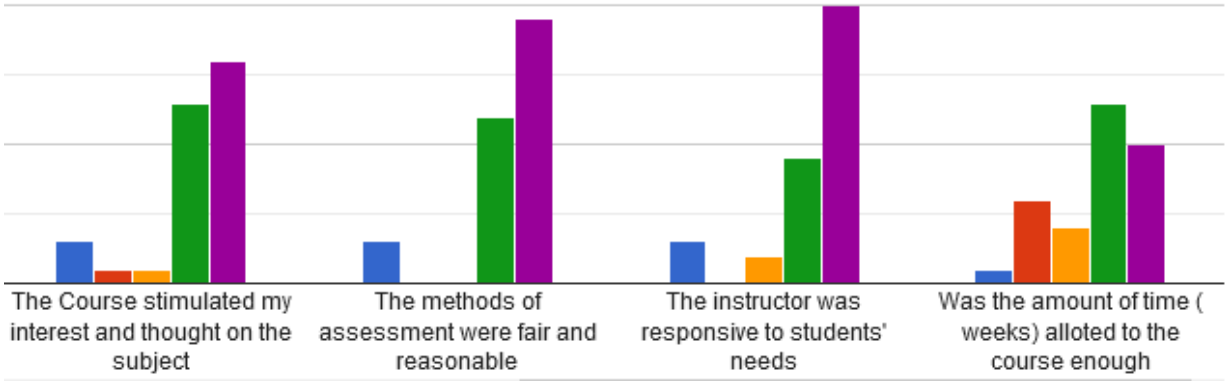


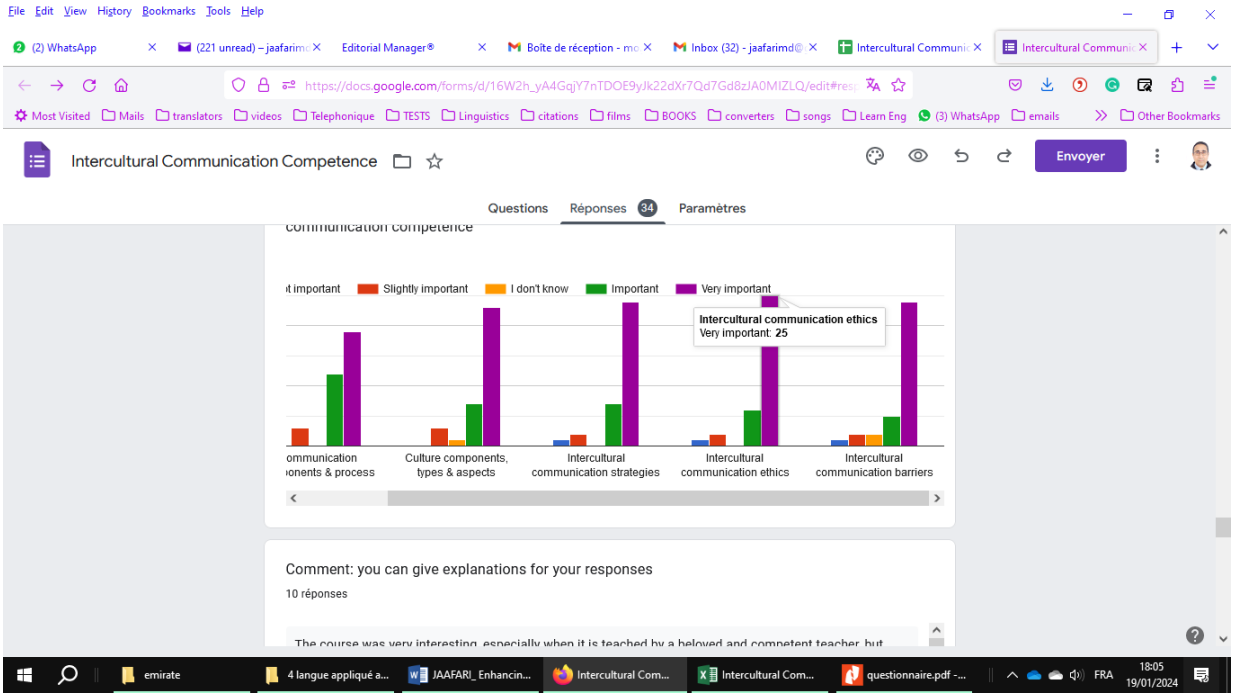



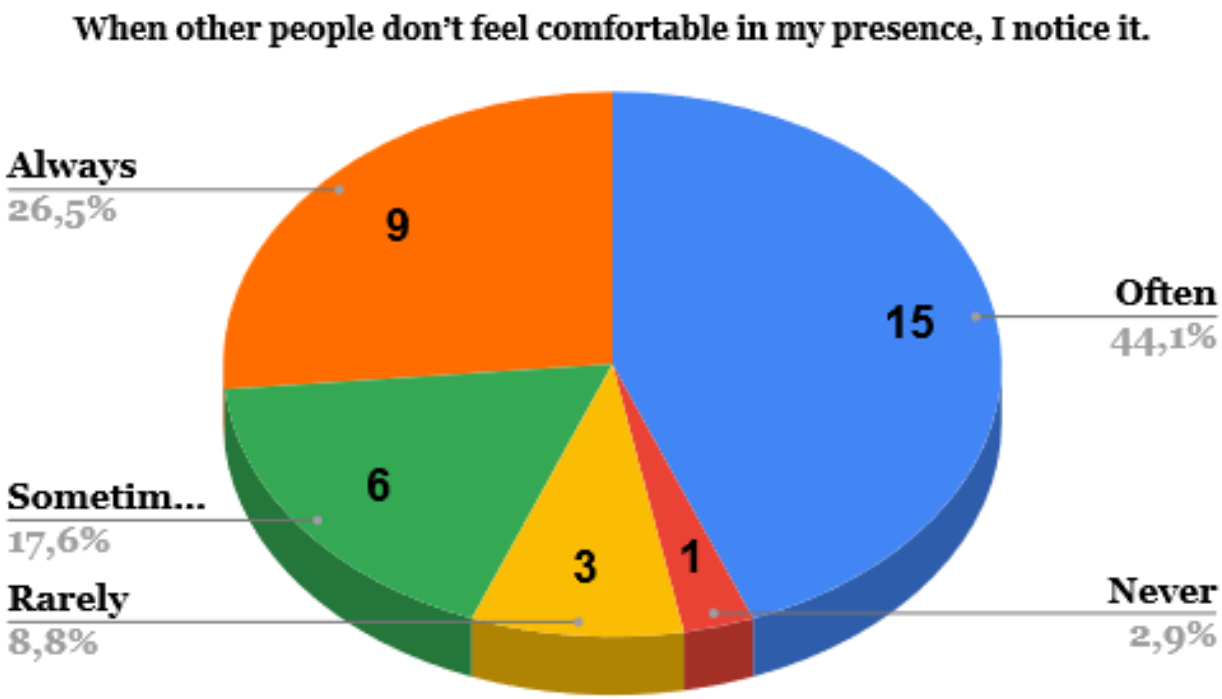

The major languages spoken by the students enrolled in the Applied Languages and Cultures course are Arabic, French, English, Amazigh, and Spanish. Chinese, German, Japanese and Korean are learned in private centres. The students' multilingual environment enhance their tolerance to differing cultures and attitudes. After the students completed the course, they admit the community is in need of learning and training in intercultural communication. However, in the open question that follows which asks them to justify with reasons. The students claim that the intercultural communication training help individuals to be aware of their own culture, ideas and attitudes and relativize them. A student summarizes the benefits of intercultural communication in the following quote:

Learning intercultural communication helps build social cohesion within a community. It encourages individuals to celebrate diversity, embrace multiculturalism, and create a sense of belonging for all members, regardless of their cultural backgrounds.


Intercultural Communication Competence
Envoyer
Questions
Réponses 34
Paramètres
Please, rate the need for the course " Intercultural Communication" in community.
Copier
34|réponses
17,6%
Very needed
28 (82,4%)
Very needed
Somewhat needed
Neutral
Not very needed
Not all needed
Why? one or more ideas in any language
28 réponses
Thank to this course people will be able to learn a lot about other cultures and that respect others values


The Course stimulated my interest and thought on the subject
The methods of assessment were fair and reasonable
The instructor was responsive to students' needs
Was the amount of time ( weeks) alloted to the course enough




If any communication instance fails, the students are conscious enough not to blame any culture involved in the case, rather they are trained to inquire about the reasons of the breakdown through further questioning and contact. In addition, it becomes ordinary for the students that foreigners may experience problems or even cultural shock with the norms and values in the local culture. For this reason, the local students are ready to take initiative to help international students to integrate in the host culture and celebrate their own cultural customs. By the end of this rubric of experiential learning, a student adds a comment thinking globally: "Interacting with people from other culture lead to global knowledge and discovering the world differently".

## Intercultural Immersive Training in Tourism Fieldwork

The subsequent module in the curriculum is "Hospitality and Tourism Industry". This module offers students an immersive opportunity that combines a business work experience with an academic program focused on intercultural communication. Exchanging the college

lifestyle for a work environment in exclusively intercultural tourism destinations.

During the initial preparatory sessions of the term, the trainees are equipped with a series of terms and concepts related to the field of tourism. To achieve this purpose, we invite tourism professionals who are affiliated to top hotel management school in Marrakech. Students learn about the structure of tourism industry and the way it operates. They also learn where people travel, how they get there, and what they do when they arrive. Similarly, they explore hospitality business strategy, food, and how to harness the power of social media.

The succeeding sessions are related to the cultural dimensions of the touristic products. Important products are those related to to the local culture, their history and value to the local and international community. Historical monuments are of prominence in culture. Likewise, food, mealtime, and dish types are served to communicate attitudes. The students receive instructions and forms to fill in online, which helps them to focus on the intercultural dimension of their experience and write reports by the end of the internship.

## Future Prospects of the Intercultural Communication Project

This is a preliminary conceptualization of Interculturality Master Project. Its aim is to set up an “academic course” especially Intercultural Master Study. Some modules can be online, while others can be taught on-campus at universities in collaboration with the Emirates Scholar. Students’ exchange mobility is included by the end of the training. As an example, this year, we have a student from Germany who came to Marrakech to study "Cultural Studies" in my class, do the exams, and go back to Germany. She is experiencing different cultures and religions first hand.

The purpose is to start an action plan to engage universal youth in conducting applied and empirical research in the fields. this is what I am doing with undergraduate students in Marrakech next semester: "Cultural Approach to Tourism" module; the students will spend one month in different hotels as tourist guides or receptionists to get in contact with foreigners and submit a report by the end of their internship. This project is to be included in institutional curriculum and conducted by research teams.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has delved into the nuanced realm of developing intercultural communication competence in university students. The paper highlights the multifaceted nature and the significance of employing effective strategies in intercultural encounters. The discussion has also explored and highlighted the role awareness of the intricacies of cultural differences in fostering the intercultural competence.

The study emphasizes the value of proactive engagement in intercultural communication experiences, enabling the trainees to navigate diverse social encounters with heightened sensitivity and awareness. The encounters include cultural meeting with visiting students, organized events on environment in partnership with foreign organizations. Student mobility is also deemed key opportunity for bridging the cultural gap.

The students trained in intercultural communication evaluate their experience and express themselves in a survey. In the questionnaire, the trainees in recognize the dynamic nature of the training in intercultural communication and its profound influence on communication dynamics in their own life and their view on the world, becoming more tolerant and open to diverse attitudes. The course on intercultural communication as part of the official curriculum emerged as crucial and strong strategy to enhance and spread mutual understanding and collaboration.

Moreover, the exploration of intercultural communication strategies illuminated the role of empathy, active listening, and adaptability in bridging cultural gaps. The emphasis on continuous learning and self-reflection emerged as crucial components for individuals seeking to enhance their intercultural communication skills.

This article serves as a resource for individuals and professionals alike. It offers insights and practical cases for fostering effective intercultural interactions and bridging the gap between diverse cultures. One strategy is inserting intercultural study in the official curriculum, the second is involving students in field experiences to meet foreigners. The third strategy is to set up international graduate studies engaging international students in global studies and mobility. As we navigate an increasingly interconnected global landscape, the ability to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries becomes indispensable. By acknowledging the challenges, appreciating diversity, and embracing cultural fluency, emotional intelligence, and empathy, We clear the path for deep relationships and cooperative endeavors across the diverse tapestry of our global society.


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