

Promoting intercultural awareness among Moroccan EFL learners: A glimpse at the affective dimension

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Abstract

The present study aims to explore the extent to which the teaching of Reading Comprehension and Précis II, using intercultural topics along with intercultural tasks enhances Moroccan University EFL learners' intercultural awareness in the area of attitudes or savoir-être. To this end, a quasi-experimental mixed-methods design was adopted. Two data collection tools were employed, namely an intercultural test, and a semi-structured interview. In light of convenience sampling, the study included 98 participants who were assigned to an experimental and a control group. The results revealed that there was a significant difference between attitudes towards cultural diversity in the sample groups. The findings also showed that there was a statistically significant increase in students' mean scores after the administration of the experiment. This indicates that students in the experimental group outperformed students in the control group. Pedagogical implications are provided for quality assurance.

Keywords: Attitudes; intercultural awareness; Moroccan EFL learners; reading comprehension and précis II

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1. Introduction

In light of the strategic vision for 2015-2030 and Morocco's constitution (2011), the inclusion of culture in syllabuses has been a focal goal in education to train citizens who can easily integrate into social interaction outside the realm of school. While the state works for the protection of the practical cultural expression of Morocco, it stresses the importance of learning and showing a good mastery of the foreign languages of integration and interaction, as well as being open to different cultures and to contemporary civilizations (Secrétariat Général du Gouvernement, 2011; CSEFRS, 2015). Therefore, not only should learners be familiar with the target culture, but they should also establish relationships (similarities and differences) between their world of origin and the target community as they neither ignore their own culture nor show negative attitudes towards the other culture (Council of Europe, 2001.)

In this respect, the Moroccan constitution has given much importance to the attitudes to which Moroccan people are attached, namely "the values of openness, of moderation, of tolerance and dialog for mutual understanding between all the cultures and the civilizations of the world" (Secrétariat Général du Gouvernement, 2011). This indicates that Morocco gives primacy to the learning of foreign languages and cultures alike, especially the English language, and emphasizes the significance of *attitudes/savoir-être* in preparing intercultural competent citizens who can function appropriately in different cross-cultural encounters. The need for global citizenship and intercultural competence raises the awareness of the integration of intercultural courses, especially at the university level, which aims at providing an everlasting learning process (CSEFRS, 2015; Koumachi, 2015; Banegas et al., 2021; Victoria & Sangiamchit 2021; Derakhshan & Ghiasvand 2022).

1.1. Purpose of study

In this spirit, the present study is an attempt to shed light on the importance of academic reading in enhancing Moroccan EFL learners' intercultural awareness in the area of *attitudes/savoir-être*. Thus, the present study seeks to explore the extent to which the teaching of "Reading Comprehension and Précis II" using intercultural topics and intercultural tasks enhances Moroccan University EFL learners' intercultural awareness in the area of *attitudes/savoir-être*. Based on this objective, the study is informed by the following research questions:

- 1) To what extent do the learners exposed to intercultural topics and intercultural tasks differ significantly from those exposed to various topics and traditional comprehension activities in the area of attitudes?
- 2) To what extent do the learners exposed to intercultural topics and intercultural tasks make significant progress in comparison with those exposed to various topics and traditional comprehension activities in the area of attitudes?

1.2. Theoretical Framework

The present study adopts Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence with much emphasis on the attitudinal/affective dimension. The *attitudes/savoir-être* dimension serves as a prerequisite for the development of intercultural awareness, especially the development of skills and critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997; Susilo et al., 2023). It enables the individual to engage easily with otherness, which is the first step towards intercultural dialogue (Lee et al., 2023). Generally, attitudes refer to the beliefs, feelings, and dispositions towards others who are perceived as different in terms of the cultural beliefs and behaviors they exhibit in their social interaction (Byram et al., 2002; Council of Europe, 2001; Chen & Hu 2023). They are defined as "openness, curiosity, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own" (Byram, 1997). Byram (1997) argues that positive attitudes towards people who are perceived as different in respect of their cultural meanings, beliefs, and behaviors lie in showing a willingness to: (i) step out from one's comfort zone to seek out opportunities to engage

with otherness in a relationship of equality, and to show interest in discovering others' perspectives concerning different events in one's own and the other culture. Based on the educational objectives suggested by Byram (1997), attitudes also involve the willingness to question one's values in cultural practices and products and to adapt one's self to different kinds of experiences of otherness during the period of residence as a sojourner. Positive attitudes are also determined by one's readiness to adopt the behaviors specific to others taking into account "the expectations others have about appropriate behaviors for a foreigner" (Byram, 1997).

In constant with Byram's (1997) original model, the Council of Europe (2001) points out that attitudes involve:

Openness towards, and interest in, new experiences, other persons, ideas, peoples, societies, and cultures; willingness to relativize [sic] one's a cultural viewpoint and cultural value-system; willingness and ability to distance oneself from conventional attitudes to cultural difference.

This implies that individuals should not only develop positive attitudes because even positive prejudice hinders communication; rather they need to develop curiosity, openness, and readiness to withhold judgment regarding others' values, beliefs, and behaviors. They need to show a willingness to relativize their values, beliefs, and behaviors, and to evaluate them from others' perspectives. They also need to value others' meanings, beliefs, and behaviors, show empathy for others, accept differences, and tolerate ambiguities (Byram, 1997; Byram et al., 2002).

Attitudes are viewed as one of the significant factors of "existential competence". This latter refers to "selfhood factors connected with their personalities, characterized by the attitudes, motivations, values, beliefs, cognitive styles, and personality types which contribute to their identity" (Council of Europe, 2001). This suggests that despite the importance of knowledge and skills in developing intercultural awareness, attitude remains the most influential factor in any intercultural situation. In line with this, attitude is linked with the affective dimension of intercultural competence that has a great influence on intercultural interactions in different cross-cultural encounters. The success of intercultural interaction is determined by the effective exchange of information and most importantly by the maintenance of human relationships which depends on the attitudinal factor. Thus, they are regarded as a pre-condition for successful intercultural interaction and communication in cross-cultural encounters (Byram, 1997). In short, the attitudes ones hold about the country wherein the target language is spoken should be developed at the very early stages of the intercultural learning experience (Byram, 1997; Byram et al., 2002).

1.3. Review of the Literature

Several research studies have been conducted to investigate the development of intercultural competence (including attitudes) in the EFL context at the national and international levels. Šenjug (2014) conducted a study investigating the effect of German language teacher professional development on primary and lower secondary level pupils' learning outcomes in intercultural competence in the Croatian context. The findings revealed that foreign language teacher professional development had positive effects on pupils' learning outcomes in terms of curiosity, openness, and stereotypes. Generally, teacher professional development influenced one segment of attitudes, that is, pupils in the treatment group showed more desirable attitudes given openness toward individuals from the German-speaking area.

On the other hand, the study focused primarily on children at the primary and lower secondary levels. Pupils at this age may not have serious attitudes or skills to perform in real-life encounters. Šenjug (2014) concluded that children (the post-primary stage) are not qualified yet to start dealing with content courses that aim at developing intercultural competence, especially at the attitudinal level. Therefore, the present study employed university students in an attempt to seek the development of their intercultural awareness in the area of attitudes after being exposed to intercultural topics and intercultural tasks.

In the same line of research, Rodríguez and Puyal (2012) conducted a study to promote intercultural competence through literature using a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL, henceforth) approach. The purpose of this study was the promotion of students' intercultural competence through reading literary texts in English along with some interactive tasks (e.g., discussing scenes and situations, role-play and dialogues, and creative tasks) within a CLIL context focusing on the cognitive and affective levels. The findings revealed that literary texts were efficient resources in developing empathy and tolerance, withholding prejudices, relativizing their own culture, and becoming open to other cultures by respecting the values and customs of different social groups.

Despite the importance of literary texts in promoting intercultural competence, Hanauer, (2001) has criticized the use of literature regarding the problem of false generalization. This implies that the cultural aspects of literary texts include being viewed from the writer's single perspective, which could provide a false picture of the community. The present study is an attempt to explore the development of intercultural awareness in the area of knowledge through exposing learners to expository reading texts (i.e., intercultural topics: The Moroccan and the American cultures) and intercultural tasks (e.g., group discussion, role-play/simulation and critical incident/scenario) to help students discuss, react, analyze, and evaluate different intercultural issues.

At the national level, EL Hiani (2018) conducted an empirical study aimed at assessing ICC and its development among Moroccan EFL undergraduate learners in light of Byram's (1997) Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). As the focus in the present study is laid on attitudes, the results revealed that Moroccan EFL learners possess positive attitudes towards cultural diversity although some participants were hesitant when discussing religious matters. The participants showed openness to engage with otherness and curiosity to discover new beliefs, ways of thinking, and different lifestyles. However, the majority were so conservative when it came to adopting foreigners' behaviors restricting the cultural practices to religious beliefs.

In similar terms to the previous study, Koumachi (2015) conducted a case study, in light of a qualitative and investigative nature design, which aimed at exploring the extent to which Moroccan EFL university students (i.e., masters' students along with a professional BA in Meknes) possess the required intercultural competencies. The study concluded that Moroccan EFL university students do possess intercultural communicative competence needed to be intercultural speakers and so they are likely to act appropriately in cross-cultural communication encounters. Apart from the development of other components of ICC, the results revealed that they do possess positive attitudes towards the target culture as they relativize their own culture and stabilize their self-identity in the process of cross-cultural mediation. The present study, however, is an extension to the aforementioned studies as it aims to explore the extent to which "Reading Comprehension and Précis II" using intercultural topics complemented by intercultural tasks has an impact on the development of Moroccan university EFL learners' intercultural awareness at the affective level. It would hopefully respond to the claim that Moroccan universities are in desperate need of intercultural courses that would prepare newly graduate students to function appropriately and effectively in real-life situations in such a cosmopolitan world (Koumachi, 2015).

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

The present study aimed to explore the extent to which the teaching of "Reading Comprehension and Précis II" using intercultural topics and intercultural tasks enhances Moroccan University EFL learners' intercultural awareness in the area of *attitudes/savoir-être*. It adopted a quasi-experimental mixed-methods design. This design aims at "mixing" both quantitative and qualitative research methods (e. g.,

use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, and inference techniques) in a single study (pre-test & post-test) to understand the research problem.

2.2. Setting and Sample

The present study was conducted at the Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Chouaib Doukkali University, El Jadida. It included 98 first-year English major students: 60 students in the experimental group and 38 students in the control group. The experimental group received the treatment (i.e., intercultural topics and intercultural tasks) in a two-hour session per week over the spring semester. A convenience sampling technique was adopted in the selection of the participants.

2.3. Data Collection Tools

In light of Byram's (1997) educational objectives, several instruments were adopted to assess Moroccan EFL learners' attitudes towards cultural diversity in the pre-test and post-test phases. This includes an intercultural test and a semi-structured interview. These tools were not treated as "divided independent compartments", but rather as "mutually complementary" in obtaining the whole picture of the process of developing and testing intercultural awareness in the area of attitudes (Owczarek, 2016). The instruments employed in the present study underwent opinions of scholars in the area of English language teaching and intercultural education to ensure their face and content validity the relevance of the items and their clarity as well as the interrelatedness of items for each construct. Based on the feedback obtained, the data collection tools were subject to several rounds of refinement. The pilot study also utilized Cronbach's Alpha for internal consistency. The results revealed that the " α " coefficient is .78. Nunnally (1978) pinpoints that a minimum level of .7 for Cronbach's Alpha coefficient value is required to determine good internal consistency. The findings demonstrated that the items have high covariance as " α " approaches 1. This indicates that the items have shared covariance, as they measure the same underlying concept.

2.4. Procedure

The study included two research groups: the experimental and the control group. In the pre-test phase, students in the experimental and the control groups were administered an intercultural test to determine their initial level of attitudes toward cultural diversity. the interview was also taken. Given the objectives proposed by Byram (1997), "Reading comprehension & précis II" served as a course through which students in the experimental group were exposed to intercultural topics (i.e., Moroccan and American cultures) complemented by intercultural tasks (i.e., role-play/simulation, group discussion, scenario/critical incident). The tasks were structured around the themes chosen. On the other hand, students in the control group were introduced to various topics along with traditional comprehension activities. In the posttest phase, students in the sample groups were administered an intercultural test. They also took an interview whose results served as a way to gain deep insights into the students' attitudes towards cultural diversity.

2.5. Ethics

Upon the onset of the experiment, permission was taken from the vice-dean of the faculty to conduct the study. After informing the participants that their answers would remain confidential and the data would be used only for research purposes, they showed interest and gave their consent to take part in the experiment. Most of the participants, if not all, attended the whole experiment as they showed a willingness to engage actively in intercultural training.

2.6. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics using means, standard deviations, and percentages were utilized to analyze the data obtained from the present study. The study also drew on inferential statistics using paired samples t-

test and the independent t-test as the major statistical measures. Cohen's *d* was also run to determine the effect size of the mean differences. The effect size was calculated after the null hypothesis was rejected in a statistical test. The data obtained from the interview was analyzed using content analysis. It was analyzed by identifying and describing students' thoughts, how they have been expressed, and how they are frequently expressed.

3. Results

3.1. Quantitative analysis of attitudes among EFL learners

3.1.1 Pre & post-treatment analysis by test items.

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics associated with the learners' performance on the intercultural test in the area of attitudes. With the help of these computations, it appears that the two groups were to some extent similar regarding intercultural awareness in the area of attitudes. However, it was observed that there were inconsistencies in students' responses in the pre-test in that students in the experimental group outperformed those of the control group in some areas and vice versa. Thus, the student's performance indicates that they had some difficulties with the level of attitude before the experiment. Regardless of the low scores obtained in the pre-test, the largest mean score in the experimental group was found in item 8 (M= 0,82), suggesting that the learners took into consideration the Americans' expectations about appropriate behaviors, and showed respect for Americans despite their ethnic group or origins in the relationship of equality. However, a low score was detected in item 4 (M= 0, 20), indicating that students had problems with the Americans' perspectives of themselves (their own culture). For the control group, in response to items 6 and 8, the results indicate that students were willing to adopt American behaviors when they had an opportunity to converse with them. Nonetheless, the lowest mean score was observed in item 4 (M= 0,21). It shows that students had difficulties with the Americans' views of Moroccan culture.

After the end of the experiment, students in the experimental group overcame their difficulties with the Americans' perspectives of their own culture, as their scores in the post-test (M= 0,52) outweighed their scores in the pre-test (M= 0,20). The students in the control group also showed positive attitudes towards the American culture with unremarkable progress in the post-test (M= 0,26) in comparison with the pre-test (M= 0,21). For item 8, the student's scores in the experimental group increased in the post-test (M= 0,90) while students' scores in the control group decreased (M= 0,84). Overall, the table demonstrates that students in the experimental group made good progress in the post-test while students in the control group performed lower than the pre-test.

Table 1

Learners' means in the sample groups by test items before and after the experiment

	Experimental Group (N=60)				Control group (N=38)			
	Mean (pre-test)	Std. D	Mean (post-test)	Std. D	Mean (pre-test)	Std. D	Mean (post-test)	Std. D
Item 1	,40	1,21	,77	,42	,47	1,48	,21	,41
Item 2	,65	,48	,87	,34	,66	,48	,61	,49
Item 3	,42	,49	,67	,47	,32	,47	,50	,50
Item 4	,20	,40	,52	,50	,21	,41	,26	,44
Item5	,32	,46	,57	,50	,37	,48	,26	,44
Item6	,72	,45	,72	,45	,87	,34	,50	,50
Item 7	,72	,45	,77	,42	,63	,48	,58	,50
Item 8	,82	,39	,90	,30	,87	,34	,84	,37
Item 9	,35	,48	,62	,49	,26	,44	,18	,39

3.1.2 Between and within-group development.

The results reported by the descriptive statistics showed that students' performance in the area of attitudes across the sample groups appeared to be unsatisfactory in the pre-test. However, an increase in students' scores in the experimental group was observed in the post-test. As Table 7 shows, the overall mean scores indicate that the difference between both groups was small in the pre-test phase whereas the mean difference became larger in the post-test. To validate this result, a hypothesis testing procedure was required. In this regard, the independent samples t-test revealed that the difference between the groups in the pre-test was found to be statistically not significant (Sig=0,42*; $p>0,05$) while it was observed to be significant in the post-test as the p-value is lower than 0,05 (Sig= 0,00*, $p<0,05$). The magnitude of the difference was observed to be weak, as Cohen's *d* is estimated by 0,1.

Table 2

Between-group developments in the area of attitude across the sample groups

Independent Samples t-test					
	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Sig.
Pre-treatment	Experimental group	60	,5093	,20282	,42*
	Control group	38	,5175	,21962	
Post-treatment	Experimental group	60	,7093	,13584	,00*
	Control group	38	,4386	,16731	

By the difference identified between the sample groups in the post-treatment analysis, the progress made in students' attitudes in the experimental group was estimated by a mean difference of 0,20 whereas the decrease in students' scores in the control group was estimated by a mean difference of 0,07. This indicates that the differences between the pre-test and the post-test were somehow big. Based on the results of the paired sample t-test, the students' attitudes in the experimental group improved significantly (Sig= 0,00*; $p<0,05$). This difference was also observed to be significant based on Cohen's *d* results ($d=-1$), as it indicates that the effect size was large. The decrease in students' attitudes in the control group was also viewed to be significant with a significance level that is less than the critical value 0,05 (Sig= 0,02*; $p<0,05$). However, it was discerned that the significant difference (Sig= 0,00) had an effect size that is weaker than that reported in the paired samples t-test based on Cohen's *d* ($d=3.04$). This suggests that the magnitude of the difference (i.e., decrease of the mean) was large.

Table 3

Within-group developments in the area of attitudes across the sample groups

Paired samples t-test						
	Group	Mean	Means difference	Std Deviation	t	Sig
Score before training	ExG	,5093	-,20000	,20842	-7,433	,00*
Score after training		,7093				
Score before training	CG	,5175	,07895	,23522	2,069	,02*
Score after training		,4386				

3.2 Qualitative analysis of attitudes among EFL learners

Given the results obtained in the pre-test and the post-test, it was found that students' attitudes in the experimental group changed in the post-test while those of the control group remained the same. After taking the intercultural training, a discernible change occurred in students' feelings and beliefs. One of the female participants acknowledged:

Before we had the course, I had a very bad attitude toward the American culture; I also thought that Americans did not have a culture, but I found some similarities and differences. I would also say that I changed my view but not too much. I'm not curious to know about the American culture, I'm curious about other cultures. I have ideas about the American culture.

This implies that even though she changed her attitude, she was still not interested in discovering the American culture. Her answer may also suggest that she is interested in other cultures more than the American one. However, her impression indicates that her attitude changed as she became aware of cultural diversity. The following example shows that the student became more open and willing to know about the American culture, he said, “Based on my experience I found the American culture is very interesting, now I feel that I’m so excited to know about it to improve my knowledge about it”. In the same vein, a participant exhibited a positive attitude after being exposed to the experiment, he admitted, “The first time I didn’t like the course because it is about the American culture, but after I found it very interesting and I developed positive attitudes about the cultural diversity”, she also felt good about learning the American culture by saying “actually I feel that their culture is interesting and rich and of course ours too”. This ensures that the participants became cognizant of cultural differences and were willing to discover other cultures to understand theirs.

After the administration of the experiment, it was observed that a student in the control group maintained her positive attitude after the experiment, “I don’t think that I changed my attitudes, I have not studied anything that has to do with the American culture just movies, but my attitudes are positive”, she also expressed desirable attitudes towards the American culture in a relationship of equality and difference “it is interesting and different, I would not say better but different”. Nevertheless, showing interest in the American culture was not common among students in the control group. A female student was inconsistent in her responses in the pre-test and the post-test, as she claimed “I am not interested in the American culture because I will not need it in the future”. Based on her answer, being interested in other cultures is associated with a purpose or profit. It was also observed that some participants were ignorant of the importance of being open to other cultures, which, eventually, implies that they held an ethnocentric perspective.

Based on the educational objectives suggested by Byram (1997, pp. 57-58), an intercultural speaker is someone who is:

Interested in the other's experience of daily life in contexts not usually presented to outsiders through the media nor used to develop a commercial relationship with outsiders is interested in the daily experience of a range of social groups within a society and not only that represented in the dominant culture.

Given this, students were asked about their willingness to engage with Americans in a relationship of equality “If you are allowed to engage with Americans who have different perceptions and beliefs, would you feel willing to take up this opportunity?”. In response to this question, several answers were found to be positive in the experimental group after the experiment.

As for the students’ responses in the post-test, all the students made a shift in attitudes, except for one single male student who exhibited resistance to looking for opportunities as a matter of his personality trait. Another case pertained to more positive attitudes to engage and share knowledge regardless of the Americans’ beliefs, he said, “Yes of course, to share and exchange information, I can improve my knowledge and the Americans will learn from me”. Regardless of being reluctant to engage with Americans in the pre-test, a female student explicitly stated, “Because I’m curious about this culture, I will look for opportunities to talk with them to discover a lot of aspects”. Significantly, a participant, who showed unwillingness to engage with others in the pre-test, became more open to the American culture as she showed readiness to look for opportunities to communicate, interact, and share her culture, she said, “I will engage and exchange information and show them my culture by respecting my beliefs and I will try to look for opportunities”. However, the exception for this group was associated with the desire of a participant to take this step, who previously held the same attitude in the pretest associating this resistance with his personality trait, “this course made me more extrovert than before because I had the

opportunity to interact with my classmates in group discussion and role-play activities, but I'm not sure that I can face native speakers". This reveals that despite the importance of the activities in developing students' attitudes, he could not overcome his fears due to the absence of real contact with Americans.

In the post-test phase, students in the control group maintained the same attitudes as observed in the pre-test. Similar to the pre-test, a female participant stated, "I don't care about Americans, they have their own beliefs and I have my own, so we can't agree". This example shows the student's unwillingness to communicate with Americans as a matter of difference. Additionally, as shown in the following example "I will look for an opportunity to talk with them; I'm an English-major student so I need to engage with Americans", it was evident that the participant was willing to take up this opportunity to develop his verbal communication skills in a relationship of profit not equality. It is worthwhile to mention that some responses were blurred as they neither indicated a willingness to engage in a relationship of equality nor they indicated an inclination to engage in seeking out the exotic or the profitable; for example, some students kept their answers short by saying "yes, sure"; "yeah". Another student suggested that:

I would appreciate talking to them. To know that American, I would not say that he is rude, I have to get in touch with them. This will allow me to engage with them and to see how they think; I will just communicate but not adopt their behaviors.

Not adopting the Americans' behaviors, however, would cause cultural misunderstandings as one fails to meet Americans' expectations about appropriate behaviors on her part. This reveals that the participant was unwilling to fully engage with others as she abstained from adopting their behaviors.

Furthermore, as an attempt to explore learners' interest in discovering foreigners' perspectives on the Moroccan culture, students were asked the following question "How willing are you to accept Americans' perspectives regarding your culture? The students' responses were analyzed based on Byram's (1997) perception of the intercultural speaker. In this respect, an intercultural speaker "does not assume that familiar phenomena of cultural practices or products common to themselves are understood in the same way by foreigners" (Byram, 1997). Given this, a considerable number of students in the experimental group were found to be interested in viewing their culture from the Americans' perspective in the post-test, while several students showed their reservations in the control group.

Positive attitudes were also observed among students in the experimental group in the post-test about their willingness to accept Americans' perspectives of themselves. Most of the participants exhibited favorable attitudes while one participant kept her negative position towards seeking others' perspectives. Similar to other cases, the following case shows that after taking the course he became aware of the importance of understanding and seeking others' perspectives, as he declared, "Actually, I'm willing to tolerate Americans' perspectives of my culture even though it is negative because I will have the opportunity to explain to him if there is a misunderstanding". On the other hand, a female participant kept her disinterest in the Americans' perspective by saying, "I'm not willing to accept because I'm convinced that my culture is different from the American one, this will just lead to problems". This shows that her resistance to change her attitude was associated with her belief that all cultures are different, and, therefore, some people may not accept that difference. Her answer also indicates that the participant was avoiding problems that may arise as a result of undervaluing her culture.

Notwithstanding the positive attitudes observed in the pre-test, some inconsistencies were found in two cases in the post-test in the control group. For instance, the first case demonstrated that being familiar with the Americans' perspectives of the Moroccan culture is unimportant. Similar to the pre-test results, the first participant confirmed "My beliefs are very different from the American's beliefs so I won't accept their judgment about my culture". A negative change in attitudes, however, was observed in another participant's responses as he said, "It depends! I may not accept if it is offensive". Unlike her attitude in

the pre-test, the participant's response illustrates that she was willing to listen to the Americans' perspectives of her culture, but her attitude would likely be negative if the Americans' opinions were offensive.

The last question asked about attitude was "Would you appreciate adopting the behaviors specific to Americans whenever you talk to them? This question reflects Byram's last objective regarding attitudes, which suggests that the intercultural speaker "adopts the behaviors specific to a social group in a way which they and the members of that group consider to be appropriate for an outsider" (Byram, 1997). In light of this, the results obtained revealed that the majority of students in the experimental group in the post-test held positive attitudes about the adoption of American behaviors when communicating.

After the end of the experiment, a remarkable positive change in students' attitudes was detected in the experimental group. The majority of students said that they preferred to adapt their behaviors to others rather than to adopt others' behaviors. A participant chose to adapt his behaviors to avoid cultural conflicts and misunderstandings; he said, "Yes, I can adapt my behaviors to others to avoid conflicts". However, another participant showed his conditional willingness to adapt his behaviors without denying his own by saying, "I will adapt my behavior and keep mine". On the other hand, two other students showed a neutral position; one of them stated that she may adopt her behaviors depending on the situation "It depends on the situation" whereas the other participant said, "I will pretend". This indicates that he was unsure about or not convinced of the idea of adopting others' behaviors. Only one participant kept his negative attitude before and after the experiment as he said, "I won't adopt their behaviors".

Nevertheless, the majority of students in the control group refused to adopt the behaviors specific to Americans in an intercultural encounter. One of the students restated almost similar statement in the post-test as said, "Not really, I won't adopt it, if they are offended, I will try to adopt it, I would prefer to keep my identity as much as they keep theirs" while two other participants simply refused to take this step. The first participant confidently said, "I won't behave like Americans definitely" and the second one simply asserted, "I will not adopt their behavior". However, only one single student held a positive attitude "Yes, sure. I will adopt their behaviors". Based on the results obtained, students in the control group were still lagging as they kept the same negative attitudes in the post-test.

4. Discussion

Although the learners' attitudes towards cultural diversity were relatively positive in the pre-test, the findings revealed that they exhibited desirable attitudes after the administration of the experiment. This indicates that the learners developed a willingness to seek out opportunities to engage with Americans in a relationship of equality, and an interest in discovering the Americans' perspectives on the interpretation of familiar and unfamiliar phenomena. They also became willing to question the values in one's environment and to engage in different forms of verbal and non-verbal communication and interaction.

The findings revealed that the majority of the students in the sample groups showed a willingness to take the initiative to seek opportunities to communicate and interact with Americans in a relationship of equality. Unlike the pre-test, the post-test results indicate that the students became more aware that the Moroccan and American cultures are equal. The qualitative analysis revealed that despite the number of students who showed undesirable attitudes, most of them became open to the American culture and interested in exploring the Americans' lifestyles and traditions. This implies that the students are willing to seek opportunities to engage with Americans in a relationship of equality. According to Byram (1997), an intercultural speaker shows interest in the individual's experience of daily life in real contexts and of a range of social groups within a society, not necessarily the dominant culture. In light of Byram's perception of the intercultural speaker, it appears that the learners' intercultural profile in this area of attitude developed.

In contrast with El Hiani's (2018) findings, the results of the present study showed that the learners developed an awareness of cultural diversity, indicating that the American culture is different from their own culture, but still, it is neither superior nor inferior to their own culture. It was also found that the students were eager to discover the unfamiliar in the American culture, as they engaged with them in a relationship of equality to share knowledge and learn from each other's culture. In the same vein, Vukić et al., (2019) reported that even though the students' understanding of the concept of decentralization was limited, the intercultural training impacted their attitudes, namely their respect for other languages/cultures, readiness to learn about them, and willingness to adapt (i.e., openness, acceptance of difference and readiness to adjust to the new environment and learn about others).

Additionally, it was frequent among the students in the present study that taking up opportunities to interact with Americans would enable them to understand the difference between both cultures and to reflect on their own culture as long as they are allowed to compare and contrast both cultures. This result could be explained by the students' exposure to intercultural knowledge along with the discussion and other intercultural tasks, which allow them to establish commonalities between their own and the American culture (Lee & Markey, 2014; Nakano et al., 2011). Comparison of the findings of the present research with those of previous studies confirms that the students' positive attitudes could be interpretable by reference to their engagement in group discussions (Gómez & Puyal, 2012; Gómez-Rodríguez, 2014; Šenjug, 2014; Wu & Marek, 2018; Zhang, 2015). Zhang (2015) demonstrates that discussions facilitate the student's development of a sense of equality, provide them with the opportunity to exchange their beliefs and views, reflect on different cultural aspects, and draw commonalities and differences between both cultures.

The previously reported findings also accord with those of Hibbs (2016), which reveal that recognizing and appreciating cultural differences is likely to be developed by establishing connections between one's own and the other culture. A similar conclusion is reached by Wu and Marek (2018), who argue that the acceptance of cultural diversity is a result of the student's exposure to the target culture and their reflections on and discussions of various cultural topics linked with their own culture and the other culture. Based on these outcomes, it is noteworthy that reading about one's own and others' cultures and reflecting on cultural differences allow the learner to experience other worlds, withhold ethnocentric perspectives, and accept cultural differences.

Additionally, it is concluded in the present study that people's perception of their own culture may have a positive (ethnorelativism/xenocentrism) or negative (ethnocentrism) impact on their attitudes toward cultural diversity. It was observed in the present study that even though the majority of the students expressed positive attitudes towards the American culture as a result of cultural relativism, the results yielded imply that the enthusiasm expressed by some of them is attributed to their negative attitudes towards their own culture, which is perceived as inferior to the American culture. In discrepancy with the findings of previous studies (Manjet et al., 2017; Nie, 2017; Gómez-Rodríguez, 2018; Jin, 2015), the attitude exhibited by some of the students was among the factors that could explain their willingness to speak the American language and discover new cultural aspects that are missing in the Moroccan culture. This calls our mind to the xenocentric perspective which is countered by the ethnocentric perspective. It is noteworthy that Byram (1997) does not refer to the xenocentric perspective in his view of openness to engage with otherness, but its connotation is more or less the same as the ethnocentric perspective in that the other culture is viewed as unequal and judged based on the individual's standards. This shows that when the learners view the other culture as unequal, their attitude is considered to be relatively negative because they violate the premise of cultural diversity which presupposes that cultures are equal despite their differences.

It is also concluded in the present study that the student's unwillingness to engage with Americans may not be directly linked to their attitudes towards the American culture itself; it could rather be associated with the individuals' personality traits or psychological factors (i.e., shyness, introversion, and nervousness). In addition, the student's unwillingness to step away from their comfort zone to discover other cultures were linked to their worries about experiencing a new culture that is different from theirs. It seems possible that this can be explained by their limited contact with native speakers. These results reflect those of Liu (2016), who demonstrates that the students who had never been abroad showed nervousness and lack of confidence before the intercultural experience, hypothesizing that constant and direct contact with people from the target culture increases the individual's willingness to learn and explore the target culture.

Furthermore, it was evident that the majority of the students in the post-test expressed a willingness to question values and beliefs in their own culture. These changes in the students' attitudes could be explained by their reflections on their culture and the American culture. This was possible only through their exposure to the target culture along with their engagement in group discussions and critical incident activities, which foster and promote critical thinking (Corbett, 2022; Huber & Reynolds, 2014). In this spirit, Liu (2016) concludes that the more the students converse and share their culture with a foreigner, the more likely they are to become cognizant of others' perspectives of them and their own culture. As a result, the students become able to reflect critically on their culture and view it from a different perspective. Along similar lines, Fernández and Pozzo (2017) emphasize the fact that when individuals are asked about their culture, they start rethinking issues relative to their culture and complementing each other's knowledge (Wu & Marek, 2018).

In consistency with the previous studies' observations, the results of the present study indicate that the tasks implemented are more likely to contribute to the development of critical thinking by enabling the learners to make evaluative analyses of different phenomena before jumping to conclusions. According to Byram (1997), the intercultural speaker "actively seeks the other's perspectives and evaluations of phenomena in the intercultural speaker's environment which are taken for granted, and takes up the other's perspectives to contrast and compare with the dominant evaluations in their society." In light of the foregoing discussion, the tasks employed in the experiment appear to be effective for the development of the learners' critical reflection, as they enable the learners to draw similarities and differences between the world of origin and the target community and encourage them to evaluate phenomena in their own and the American culture. In addition to the importance of multicultural texts and communicative tasks (Gómez-Rodríguez, 2014; Rodríguez & Puyal, 2012), Chan and Klayklung (2018) and Gómez-Rodríguez (2018) highlight the role of establishing connections between the world of origin and the target community in questioning and relativizing one's cultural beliefs and identity.

Additionally, it was observed that a large number of students in the present study exhibited a willingness to tolerate the Americans' perspectives of their culture, as they would have the opportunity to explain the misunderstanding to the Americans. Despite the inconsistencies found in the students' responses, it seemed that they were convinced that the Moroccan culture is viewed differently by foreigners (i.e., Americans), and thus to gain more insights into the other culture, the individual should live in that country. This result is highly likely to be attributed to the student's experience of role-play activities, which in turn allows the individual learner to experience a new way of thinking, new norms, and a new identity (Huber & Reynolds, 2014). Huber and Reynolds (2014) assert that role-play activities enable the learners to act "differently from their usual ways, norms, and standards." In this regard, the student's interest in others' views of themselves is explained by their perception of the other as different, meaning that he/she should not be judged based on their standards because each culture has its properties and lifestyles.

The findings of the present study also demonstrated that the majority of them changed their perceptions, as they realized that cultural differences could be understood by viewing them differently and not judging them based on one's own beliefs and values. It was also observed that the students developed their attitudes by holding an ethno-relative perspective, predicting that they are capable of decentring and relativizing their own culture about the American culture. These findings are congruent with several studies (Fernández & Pozzo, 2017; Jin, 2015; Gómez-Rodríguez, 2018; Lee & Markey, 2014) which suggest that the discussion of intercultural issues triggers the potential to change one's perspective by relativizing one's own culture and valuing the other culture. Fernández and Pozzo (2017) assert that discussing and sharing cultural aspects in both cultures allow students to reconsider previously held assumptions about their interlocutors in the course of a conversation and adopt the other's perspective to adjust their discourse to their interlocutors' knowledge level. Given these findings, it appears that the more the students converse with people holding different perspectives and discuss intercultural issues in both cultures, the more they are likely to relativize their own culture and value the other culture by viewing the other culture from the other's perspectives.

The current study also supports Fernández and Pozzo's (2017) findings, showing that establishing common ground can enable students to anticipate what others think of their culture and to adjust these perceptions. This is a mental process that necessitates distancing oneself from one's culture by adopting a critical position and taking up the other's perspective. It is noteworthy that communication allows overcoming erroneous conceptions that affect the students' interpretation of reality, which serves as the first step towards a change in perspective. These findings corroborate those of Gómez-Rodríguez (2018), who demonstrates that the discussion of controversial issues and cultural differences leads to the development of attitudes towards cultural diversity, mainly empathy, implying the ability to relativize one's views and consider others' views (Heinzmann et al., 2015; Hibbs, 2016; Jin, 2015; Lee & Markey, 2014; Maharaja, 2018).

In line with previous research (Gómez-Rodríguez & Puyal, 2012; Gómez-Rodríguez, 2014), the development of the students' attitudes can be attributed to the amalgamation of group discussion, role-playing, and critical incident tasks, which offer experiences of cultural differences and enable them to share and withhold preconceptions and establish relationships. In this regard, Huber and Reynolds (2014) argue that role-play and simulation activities facilitate the development of attitudes in terms of openness, curiosity, respect for plurality, tolerance, and willingness to withhold judgments. However, students can learn more effectively when there is room for discussion after the implementation of such activities to enable them to reflect on their experience (Huber & Reynolds, 2014; Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2008). Corbett (2022) also affirms that critical incidents encourage learners to "decenter from their everyday habits of thought." (Byram, 1997). In light of the literature, it is concluded that the complementarity between the above-stated tasks could lead to desirable outcomes in the area of attitudes.

In this spirit, Tran et al., (2019) demonstrate that teaching through critical incident open-ended tasks (i.e., student pair/group work) could enhance students' intercultural communication awareness, especially when implemented in conjunction with other forms of cross-cultural communication, mainly role-play activity (Byram et al., 2009). Additionally, they emphasize that the critical incident technique is effective for cross-cultural training in EFL classes, particularly for introducing intercultural misunderstandings that direct further cross-cultural training. Due to the role of critical incidents in stimulating critical thinking, the students learn to withhold negative stereotypes by describing and interpreting the cultural situation/problem before making judgments and questioning and reflecting on beliefs in their own and the target culture. In the same vein, Zhang (2015) concludes that intercultural situations encourage the individual to share his/her stereotypes about the target culture which results in deepening his/her understanding of his/her views of cultural diversity. However, these findings do not fall in line with those of Šenjug (2014), who revealed that the effect of the intercultural training was limited, especially in the

area of attitudes, as the pupils below the age of 10 do not possess a developed system of values. She attributes the students' failure to withhold stereotypes to the cognitive and affective maturation and the age factor. This implies that beyond a certain age (i.e., the age of 10) the individual learner is more likely to accept the similarities between his/her culture and the other culture.

Finally, yet importantly, the students in the current study showed positive attitudes toward the adoption of verbal and non-verbal behaviors specific to Americans. It was also revealed that the majority of the students in the experimental group displayed a willingness to adapt and adjust their behaviors to avoid conflicts and not to please them, while others expressed their conditional readiness to adopt the Americans' behaviors. This implies that if the situation requires the individual to detach from his/her beliefs and values, he/she would prefer to keep his/her behavior. This finding is in partial agreement with that of Koumachi (2015), who concludes that the students exhibited a willingness to behave like Americans and adopt their behaviors. However, this may imply that these students hold a xenocentric perspective that is based on prioritizing other cultures over their own. Furthermore, the progress made by the students in the present study could highly be explained by their engagement in discussions and reflections on different cultural aspects in their own and other cultures, which ultimately raises their awareness of cultural differences that would cause problems in real-life encounters. This awareness would enable the students to consider others' behaviors and meet their expectations when communicating in an intercultural encounter. This conclusion further supports Vukić et al.,'s (2019) results, which reveal that the importance of case studies (critical incidents), discussions, and reflections lies in enabling students to develop a willingness to adapt their behavior rather than changing opinions to avoid conflicts and to show a certain respect for others' habits and norms. Lee and Markey (2014) also conclude that the discussions of different intercultural topics are effective for the development of attitudes towards one's own and the target culture in that they enable the learner to detach from his beliefs and meet others' expectations. This ensures that intercultural tasks serve as effective alternatives for real intercultural and face-to-face encounters, especially when they are implemented properly.

Due to the cultural and religious differences between the Moroccan and American communities, it appears that the students in the present study found it challenging to completely engage with the American rites of verbal and non-verbal communication and interaction, as the Americans' practices may not comply with the Muslims' beliefs and values. Hence, their unwillingness to meet the Americans' expectations about appropriate behaviors might be related to their Islamic background, which urges Muslims not to adopt misbehaviors that contradict their values. By the same token, El Hiani (2018) asserts that the students are obsessed with making conscious reference to their religious beliefs. This reflects the students' parochialism in terms of limiting their interests and views of culture to their religious background. This outcome is contrary to that of the present study, which suggests that the students were willing to engage and exchange information as long as the Americans' behaviors did not contradict the Islamic norms. Their readiness to engage could be interpreted by reference to their willingness to develop their communication skills and share different cultural aspects. The above-stated findings indicate that the students in the present study are open to adapting their behaviors to meet the Americans' expectations by reserving their religious identity (i.e., Islamic identity).

In view of the foregoing discussion, meaningful cross-cultural communication necessitates the individual to exhibit a sense of tolerance, empathy, love, peace, and respect. This is shown in the following verse as Islam has called for cross-cultural dialogue:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

(سورة الحجرات: 13)

This verse translates as “O people, we created you from a male and a female and made you into peoples and tribes that you may come to know one another. Indeed, the most honorable of you in the sight of God is the most pious of you. Indeed, God is All-Knowing, All-Aware. (13: Surah Al-Hujurat)”. Based on this verse, the Islamic identity could serve as a starting point for Moroccans to be intercultural speakers capable of communicating and interacting effectively and appropriately in cross-cultural encounters with people from different cultures. It is addressed in the verse that people should get to know each other regardless of their religion or belief for meaningful cross-cultural communication. This sense of intercultural dialogue is considered to be among the values that Moroccan people are attached to, including openness, tolerance, and dialogue for mutual understanding between different cultures (Secrétariat Général du Gouvernement, 2011). Thus, raising the learners’ awareness of these values was of great significance as a way to develop their intercultural awareness.

Following the results obtained in the present study, the majority of the students understood that to avoid cultural conflicts, it is important to adapt their behaviors to meet others’ expectations. This implies that their ethnocentric and xenocentric perspectives changed towards an ethno-relative perspective to a large extent, assuming that the students do possess positive attitudes towards cultural diversity. These findings are not consistent with those of El Hiani (2018) and Koumachi (2015). El Hiani’s (2018) findings showed that despite the students’ acceptance of differences and willingness to engage with others and explore the American culture, a schizophrenic perspective was observed among the students about the adoption of the Americans’ behaviors in intercultural encounters. It was also found that although students were impressed by the American lifestyles and culture, they expressed that the attachment to the social conventions associated with the American culture is difficult, as it represents derogation to their Moroccan identity. Similarly, Koumachi’s (2015) findings revealed that a schizophrenic attitude was observed among the students when they were asked about their perception of adopting the language Americans speak and their behaviors along with their views of the American people compared to their own. Their answers indicate that they are willing to adopt the American language and behave like Americans, but they do not view American people as sophisticated and urbane when compared to their people. Koumachi (2015), therefore, concludes that “students who reject something at the surface, wish deep down to adopt it.” This implies that everything that floats on the surface may not always reflect what is in the depth.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the findings revealed that the participants developed desirable attitudes that enabled them to withhold negative stereotypes, communicate and engage with Americans in the relationship of equality, relativize and decenter their own culture, and withhold ethnocentric perspectives. It is, therefore, concluded that students who were exposed to intercultural topics and intercultural tasks outperform students in the control group in the area of attitudes (*savoir-être*). The results revealed that the learners in the experimental group exhibited positive attitudes in comparison with the learners in the control group after being exposed to “Reading Comprehension & Précis II” using intercultural topics and intercultural tasks. The results also showed that the increase in the learners’ scores after the experiment was found to be statistically significant within the experimental group while a significant decrease in the learners’ scores was observed within the control group. For further insights, the qualitative analysis showed that there was a remarkable change in the learners’ attitudes in the experimental group despite the inconsistency that was found in their responses.

Several implications can be drawn from the present study for learners, teachers, and decision-makers. Today’s world necessitates intercultural speakers who hold positive attitudes that enable them to accept cultural differences, tolerate uncertainties and misunderstandings, and meet all people with the same respect regardless of their cultural belonging. Thus, learners should develop several attitudes to be able to communicate and mediate between different perspectives, resolve cultural misunderstandings and

conflicts, establish relationships between the world of origin and the target community, reflect on their intercultural experience, and critically evaluate their own and the target culture(s). prominent among these attitudes are openness to engage with otherness, curiosity to discover the unfamiliar in the target culture, questioning one's beliefs by relativizing one's own culture, tolerance, respect, and acceptance for difference. By developing these attitudes, learners would have the willingness and readiness to interact and mediate differences in cross-cultural contexts. It is also worth mentioning that learners should not only be introduced to cultural facts (i.e., shallow learning), but they should also be exposed to deep culture, including attitudes, beliefs, and values. This would inevitably help them communicate and mediate successfully in multicultural contexts. The present study also informs that learners should be engaged in group discussions to discuss different intercultural issues, raise their awareness of the similarities and differences between their own culture and the other culture(s), and, ultimately, develop positive attitudes. Learners should also be involved in critical incident/scenario activity, as it enables them to avoid making false assumptions about the target culture. It also enables them to withhold negative judgments, and most importantly, to develop their critical thinking.

However, learners' intercultural awareness in the area of attitudes cannot be developed without an appropriate intervention on the part of the teacher. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers should be interculturally competent at the level of human relations and teaching methodology to teach intercultural awareness successfully. This implies that an intercultural course requires well-trained teachers who are well-equipped with attitudes, knowledge, and skills, who understand the concept of intercultural awareness, and who have the necessary methodological tools. It is also suggested that teachers adopt an intercultural framework that would serve as a roadmap for intercultural teaching and assessment. This enables teachers to design a comprehensive course with intercultural communicative tasks that are structured around the intercultural themes addressed through the objectives. The present study suggests that teachers' understanding of intercultural learning approach would not put students at risk, it would rather lead to the development of positive attitudes towards cultural diversity, enable learners to shift from an ethnocentric to an ethno-relativistic worldview, as they withhold negative prejudices and stereotypes.

The methods, approaches, and techniques used by the teacher may affect learners' attitudes toward the English course. Therefore, emphasis should not only be laid on intercultural-based materials but it should also be laid on intercultural-based tasks that foster learners' attitudes. Furthermore, teachers should reflect on how they can help learners develop their attitudes toward cultural diversity by asking the following major questions:

- How can I help learners demonstrate positive attitudes towards cultural diversity, including respect tolerance, and openness to other ways of viewing the world?
 - How can I help students develop an 'intercultural lens' through which to view the world?
- This suggests that teachers should encourage learners to view the world from an intercultural perspective.

Given this, much effort should be made to train teachers to have an intercultural profile. Policymakers should create ample intercultural training opportunities for university teachers to enable them to become intercultural teachers capable of teaching intercultural awareness (especially in the area of attitudes) in an EFL context where there is limited contact with native speakers. Thus, it is of great importance, for decision-makers, to offer professional training programs for teachers at levels of human relations and the teaching methodology.

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