



## **Reading Beyond Words: Cultivating Intercultural Mediation and Interaction Skills through Critical Reading Tasks among EFL Students**

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This study investigates the extent to which academic reading that incorporates intercultural topics and tasks fosters the development of intercultural awareness among Moroccan EFL learners, specifically in the areas of interpreting and relating, and discovery and interaction. A quasi-experimental mixed-methods design was employed, with two data collection tools administered prior to and after the experiment, including an intercultural test and a semi-structured interview. Relying on available subjects, the study involved 98 participants assigned to an experimental and a control group. The findings associated with the quantitative analysis demonstrated that the students' overall mean score in the experimental group was higher than that of the control group in the area of skills of interpreting and relating, as well as the skills of discovery and interaction. Similar to the quantitative findings, the qualitative analysis exhibited that the students in the experimental group developed a better understanding of the mediation and interaction skills needed in intercultural encounters, as they successfully managed to detect areas of misunderstanding and critically respond to them using a strategic approach to conflict resolution. The study concludes with several pedagogical implications for enhancing intercultural learning, highlighting the systematic incorporation of critical intercultural tasks to improve learners' mediation and interaction skills and to ensure quality and relevance in EFL education at the university level.

Keywords: intercultural awareness, mediation, interaction, academic reading, Moroccan EFL learners

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the increasingly globalized world, the ability to mediate and interact across cultural boundaries has become an essential skill for effective communication. This need is particularly pronounced in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, where learners must not only acquire linguistic proficiency but also develop intercultural competence (see Bennett, 1986, 1997; Kramsch, 1993; Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2004 among others). Morocco, with its rich cultural tapestry and strategic position as a bridge between Africa and Europe, presents a unique context for studying intercultural competencies. Moroccan EFL learners are often exposed to diverse cultural narratives and perspective through their academic reading materials. This exposure can

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be harnessed to enhance their ability to understand, interpret, and navigate intercultural interactions effectively. Given the particularity of the cultural heritage in Morocco, it is clearly addressed in the Moroccan constitution (2011) that individuals should serve as ambassadors for their culture and open a space for intercultural communication with people from different backgrounds. The document also highlights the critical role mediation and interaction skills play in maintaining strong relationships within a heterogeneous, multicultural environment (Secrétariat Général du Gouvernement, 2011). This has set the ground for the incorporation of the intercultural dimension in the Moroccan school syllabi, as stipulated in the strategic vision 2015-2030 (CSEFRS, 2015).

Despite the importance given to attitudes and knowledge in the intercultural learning process, the role of mediation and interaction skills is critical while it remains indisputable. According to Byram (1997; 2002; 2009), Byram et al. (2009) and Dearsdorff (2004), being an intercultural intermediary necessitates the development of desirable attitudes towards diversity and sufficient cultural knowledge about one's own culture and the other culture as a way to mediate differences and interact effectively and appropriately. This suggests that responding to cultural conflicts effectively is an outcome of the effective amalgamation of attitudes, knowledge and skills (Council of Europe, 2001). It has also been evident that the intercultural learning process cannot be complete until mediation skills are developed, as they represent a realistic goal for language learning and a physical manifestation of attitudes, knowledge and other skills of discovery and interaction (Byram & Zarate, 1994; Kramsch, 1996; Byram, 1997; Crozet, Liddicoat & Lo Bianco, 1999). This concrete manifestation lies in detecting causes of misunderstanding, establishing relationships between conflicting views and drawing significant conclusions, appealing to the expectations of the different parties involved in the dispute (Bennett, 1986; Kramsch, 1993, 2013; Corbett, 2003; Dearsdorff, 2004).

However, despite the theoretical emphasis on mediation and interaction within models of intercultural communicative competence, empirical research has tended to prioritize attitudes and cultural knowledge, with comparatively limited attention paid to the ways in which mediation and interaction skills could be systematically developed and assessed through specific pedagogical practices, particularly in EFL university settings. Moreover, in the Moroccan EFL context, research examining academic reading as a pedagogical space for fostering these skills remains scarce, leaving a gap between theoretical conceptualizations of intercultural mediation and classroom-based instructional practices.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to understand how academic reading can be leveraged to cultivate skills of mediation and interaction among Moroccan EFL learners. Thus, the primary aim of this research is to develop an intercultural profile for Moroccan EFL learners, highlighting the specific skills of mediation and interaction that are essential for their academic and professional success. Based on the objective of the study, the following research questions are addressed: (1) to what extent do the learners exposed to intercultural topics and tasks differ significantly from those introduced to various topics and traditional comprehension activities in terms of interpreting and

relating skills?, and (2) to what extent do the learners exposed to intercultural topics and tasks differ significantly from those introduced to various topics and traditional comprehension activities in terms of discovery and interaction skills?

Drawing on the research questions, two main hypotheses are constructed: 1H<sub>0</sub>: The learners exposed to intercultural topics and tasks differ significantly from those introduced to various topics and traditional comprehension activities in terms of interpreting and relating skills. 2H<sub>0</sub>: The learners exposed to intercultural topics and tasks differ significantly from those introduced to various topics and traditional comprehension activities in terms of discovery and interaction skills.

By exposing students to intercultural topics and tasks, the study seeks to identify pedagogical strategies that can foster these skills, including the nature of the content and reading materials, the activities employed and assessment methods used. This study will provide insights into the current state of intercultural competence among Moroccan EFL learners. It will also offer practical recommendations for educators on how to integrate intercultural training into EFL curricula effectively. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to the broader discourse on intercultural education by providing a detailed examination of how academic reading can serve as a tool for developing crucial mediation and interaction skills among EFL learners. By fostering these competencies, educators can better prepare Moroccan students to thrive in a multicultural and interconnected world.

## **THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Conceptual insights into the skills of interpreting and relating**

Building on Byram's (1997) framework of intercultural communicative competence, the current study places particular emphasis on the skills of interpreting and relating and those of discovery and interaction, which constitute the two primary theoretical constructs underpinning the research. To begin with, the skills of interpreting and relating are fundamental to developing intercultural competence, enabling individuals to understand and connect cultural phenomena across contexts. These skills involve making sense of cultural documents or events from another culture and relating them to one's own experiences. As Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey (2002) explain, they are defined as the "[a]bility to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one's own" (p. 13; see also Byram, 1997). Learners draw on existing knowledge to identify with specific cultural behaviors or texts and to compare and contrast them with those from their own culture (Byram, 1997). Such comparative analysis fosters an awareness of similarities and differences and helps anticipate potential intercultural misunderstandings. Effectively navigating these challenges requires not only the attitudinal disposition of decentering but also the skills to critically compare and relate cultural perspectives (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002), enabling learners to anticipate how actions may be interpreted across cultural contexts.

Building on this foundation, learners are able to interpret and critically analyze cultural documents or events to uncover underlying similarities and differences (Byram, 1997).

This declarative knowledge forms the basis for identifying relationships between their own and other cultural environments. Such understanding equips learners to function as intercultural mediators by integrating personal experience with cultural knowledge to resolve misunderstandings. From Deardorff's (2004, 2006) perspective, intercultural competence involves acquiring new knowledge through attentive listening, observation, and evaluation, as well as applying it through analysis, interpretation, and relating. Consistent with this view, Byram's framework delineates these skills into declarative and procedural facets. Educational objectives emphasize training learners to recognize ethnocentric perspectives, explain cultural origins, identify sources of misunderstanding, and mediate conflicts by clarifying disagreements and articulating differing viewpoints (Byram, 1997).

### **The skills of discovery and interaction as a multifaceted construct**

Besides the skills of interpreting and relating, the skills of discovery and interaction are essential for effective intercultural communication, enabling learners to acquire new cultural knowledge and engage in real-time exchanges. Discovery involves actively building new cultural frameworks when existing knowledge about the interlocutor's culture is insufficient. As Byram (1997) explains, this process requires an attitude of curiosity to explore and understand the beliefs, meanings, and behaviors of different social groups. While full mastery of another culture may be unattainable, expanding prior knowledge through experiential learning fosters a functional understanding of the target culture's practices and values (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002). Interaction represents the practical application of these skills in communicative contexts. Byram (1997, p. 38) defines it as the ability to consider multiple factors, including time constraints, mutual perceptions, and attitudes, while combining prior knowledge with exploratory and interpretive skills during intercultural exchanges. Both skills rely on appropriate attitudes and knowledge, which are critical for managing misunderstandings and potential dysfunctions in intercultural communication.

Building on this foundation, Byram (1997) emphasizes that EFL learners must be trained to employ questioning techniques to uncover connotations, presuppositions, and cultural origins embedded in documents or events through interaction with interlocutors. Learners should identify implicit references to shared cultural meanings and values, such as those related to national memory, spatial concepts, and social distinctions, and establish meaningful relationships among them to function effectively as intercultural speakers or intermediaries. This competency involves discerning similarities and differences in verbal and non-verbal interaction processes and negotiating their appropriate application in specific contexts. Learners must also draw upon their knowledge, attitudes, and skills in interpreting, relating, discovery, and interaction in real time to ensure mutual understanding and prevent communicative breakdowns. Finally, they should be prepared to intervene appropriately in intercultural conflicts, using their acquired knowledge, skills, and attitudes to mediate effectively between interlocutors from their own culture and the target culture.

### **Previous research on the development of intercultural competence**

Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence foregrounds the importance of interpreting and relating, and discovery and interaction skills, which

serve as the foundation for this study. Scholars increasingly recognize that these mediation and interaction skills are crucial for effective intercultural communication, especially in EFL contexts. Several studies converge on the value of experiential learning in developing intercultural competence. Maharaja (2018) and Heinzmann et al. (2015) highlight that immersive experiences, such as study abroad programs and cultural exposure activities, significantly enhance learners' attitudes and interaction skills. Liu (2016) extends this argument by demonstrating that frequent intercultural contact, even outside formal study abroad, can foster communication skills, although he cautions that without formal training in negotiation and mediation strategies, learners may struggle to effectively bridge cultural differences. This indicates that exposure alone is insufficient; structured intercultural education is necessary to develop higher-order mediation skills. In this spirit, Uyun and Warsah (2022) realized that an intercultural-like/multicultural learning experience could lead to the development of knowledge, interpretive skills and, most importantly, readiness to engage across cultures, which is vital in enhancing the quality of intercultural dialogue.

Reflection and critical engagement emerge as another vital theme. Yue (2019) and Chan and Klayklung (2018) emphasize that learners' ability to interpret cultural situations critically supports effective mediation by encouraging the questioning of one's own cultural assumptions. However, Karras (2017) provides a contrasting finding: intercultural communication courses may improve engagement but do not necessarily enhance intercultural sensitivity, suggesting a gap between activity participation and deep intercultural learning. Still, when implemented properly, interaction turns out to be meaningful as it allows for critical evaluation and intercultural mediation (see also Dimitrov et al., 2014). This aligns with critiques from Byram (1997) and others (Corbett, 2003; Deardorff, 2004) that effective mediation requires not only interaction but also sustained reflection, critical thinking, and exposure to diverse cultural scenarios. This conclusion was also corroborated by Saputra et al (2019), who found that problem solving, a conflict resolution skill, can promote critical thinking, allowing learners to reflect and draw analogies in light of their own and the target culture (see also Ay et al., 2019; Fujioka-Ito, 2024).

Wu and Marek's (2018) study introduces an innovative angle, showing that online social media communities can facilitate intercultural competence development through peer reflection and cultural interaction, a finding that complements earlier work by Zhang (2015) and Jin (2015) who affirm the role of critical reflection and cultural awareness in preparing learners for real-world intercultural encounters (see also Fernández & Pozzo, 2017). Wu and Marek's conclusion that students benefit more from peer reflections than passive video consumption underscores the active, social nature of intercultural learning.

The debate on instructional materials further complicates the picture. While Gómez-Rodríguez (2018) and Rezaei and Naghibian (2018) confirm that authentic texts and dialogic tasks support critical intercultural awareness, Edmondson (1997, as cited in Hanauer, 2001) critiques the use of literary texts for often perpetuating skewed cultural representations. This critique suggests that material choice significantly influences

learning outcomes, advocating for a balanced use of authentic, academic, and literary texts combined with guided questioning and experiential tasks.

Focusing on the Moroccan context, El Hiani (2018) and Elboubekri (2017) reveal a paradox: learners demonstrate foundational intercultural competence but lack critical cultural awareness, which is essential for true mediation. This echoes the need identified by Liu (2016) and others for explicit training in negotiation and reflection. Meanwhile, Koumachi (2015) finds that Moroccan students possess basic mediation skills due to age and exposure but fall short in deeper knowledge and criticality, likely due to insufficient intercultural pedagogy. The tension between professors' emphasis on knowledge transmission and students' preference for discovery and discussion (Elboubekri, 2017) reflects a broader pedagogical gap that hinders the full development of intercultural competence.

Building on these findings, the current study responds to the identified need for structured intercultural training that combines authentic intercultural reading materials with experiential and reflective tasks. By embedding Byram's (1997) key skills of interpreting and relating, and discovery and interaction, into a university-level "Reading Comprehension and Précis II" course, this study seeks to bridge the gap between intercultural exposure and critical mediation ability. It aims to cultivate not only declarative knowledge but also procedural and metacognitive skills through hands-on, critical activities designed to enhance Moroccan EFL learners' mediation and interaction competencies, areas underexplored in previous Moroccan research.

Furthermore, this study addresses methodological weaknesses noted in the literature, such as the lack of clear intercultural teaching frameworks and insufficient triangulation by implementing a quasi-experimental design with authentic materials and guided reflective questioning. In doing so, it contributes to closing the gap between theoretical models and practical intercultural pedagogy, particularly within the Moroccan higher education context where such integration remains scarce.

## **METHOD**

### **Research design**

The present study employed a quasi-experimental mixed-methods design to investigate the extent to which integrating intercultural themes and intercultural communicative tasks into the Reading Comprehension and Précis II course enhances Moroccan university EFL learners' skills of interpreting and relating as well as skills of discovery and interaction, as theorized in Byram's (1997) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). This design incorporated both quantitative and qualitative approaches, enabling comprehensive data collection, analysis, and interpretation. While the experimental group received instruction grounded in intercultural pedagogy, the control group followed a conventional reading comprehension curriculum. Pre- and post-intervention measurements were administered to assess the impact of the treatment.

### Setting and sample

The research was conducted at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Chouaib Doukkali University, El Jadida, during a single academic semester. For a more realistic examination of the impact of intercultural reading based instruction, a non-random convenience sampling technique was adopted, as the participants were drawn from intact first-year EFL classes to which the researcher had institutional access, ensuring ecological validity and minimal disruption to regular instructional practices. The study included a total of 98 students, with 60 allocated to the experimental group and 38 to the control group, reflecting existing class enrolment patterns rather than researcher manipulation. Despite the unequal group sizes, both groups were comparable in terms of academic level, curricular exposure, and linguistic background, which helped reduce selection bias. This limitation reflects the realities of classroom-based research and was mitigated through pre-testing and appropriate statistical controls (independent samples t-test & Cohen's *d*). Add to this, Homogeneity test showed no statistically significant difference between the groups, suggesting initial equivalence (see appendix 1). The experimental cohort engaged in weekly two-hour sessions that incorporated intercultural readings and communicative tasks, whereas the control group was exposed to traditional texts accompanied by standard comprehension exercises. This instructional differentiation aimed to isolate the effect of intercultural content on learners' development of targeted ICC skills.

### Data collection procedures

To evaluate students' intercultural competence, data were collected through two major instruments: an intercultural test and a semi-structured interview protocol. These tools were designed in alignment with Byram's (1997) educational objectives, targeting both declarative (knowledge-based) and procedural (performance-based) aspects of intercultural competence.

The intercultural test, which is scenario-based, combining multiple-choice questions (MCQs) with short commentary responses, was administered to both groups at the pre-test and post-test stages to measure changes in learners' abilities in the domains of interpreting, relating, discovery, and interaction. In parallel, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of ten students from the experimental group to yield deeper insights into their perceptions, reflections, and experiential learning outcomes. This methodological triangulation ensured a more nuanced understanding of the instructional impact.

The treatment consisted of curated reading materials with intercultural relevance, particularly focusing on Moroccan and American sociocultural contexts. Instructional activities were structured around interactive and experiential methods, such as role-plays, simulations, critical incident analysis, and group discussions. These were framed within constructivist learning theories, notably the D.I.E. (Describe, Interpret, Evaluate) framework proposed by Bennett, Bennett, and Stillings (1977). Texts were selected according to specific criteria outlined by the Council of Europe (2001). Meanwhile, the control group engaged in cultural topics using standard comprehension strategies.

### **Data analysis**

Quantitative data from the intercultural skills test were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and percentages) to outline general performance trends, and inferential statistics, including paired-sample and independent-sample *t*-tests, to identify significant within- and between-group differences. To gauge the practical significance of these differences, Cohen's *d* was calculated to determine effect sizes following statistically significant outcomes. Qualitative data from the interviews were subjected to thematic content analysis. Recurring ideas, lexical patterns, and participant narratives were coded and categorized to reveal salient themes related to intercultural awareness, engagement, and skill development. This analysis complemented the quantitative findings, offering a more holistic account of the learners' intercultural trajectory.

### **FINDINGS**

#### **Quantitative analysis of learners' skills of interpreting and relating**

##### *Pre & post-treatment analysis by test items*

Table 1 compares the mean scores of students in the experimental and control groups regarding the skills of interpreting and relating. The results indicated notable differences between the groups. Although the mean scores varied, students in the experimental group demonstrated awareness of interpreting and relating skills, particularly on Item 6 ( $M = .77$ ). Interestingly, the control group scored higher on this item in the pre-test ( $M = .89$ ), suggesting an initial capacity to engage in cultural mediation. However, while the control group's lowest mean score appeared on Item 1 ( $M = .26$ ), the experimental group showed relatively higher minimum scores on Items 1 and 5 ( $M = .37$  each), indicating more consistent performance.

The post-test results revealed significant gains in the experimental group and a decline in the control group's scores across all items. Following the intervention, students in the experimental group demonstrated improved ability to identify and explain ethnocentric perspectives (e.g., Item 1: "Muslims are actually not tolerant") and to mediate conflicting interpretations (e.g., Item 5). These developments suggest enhanced intercultural competence in the experimental group. Overall, the post-test data support that the experimental group outperformed the control group, evidencing measurable improvement in the skills of interpreting and relating following targeted intercultural instruction.

Table 1  
Learners' means in the sample groups by test items prior to and after the experiment

	Experimental Group (N=60)				Control group (N=38)			
	Mean (pre)	Std. D	Mean (post)	Std. D	Mean (pre)	Std. D	Mean (post)	Std. D
Item 1	.37	.48	.77	.42	.26	.44	.21	.41
Item 2	.67	.47	.80	.40	.61	.49	.55	.50
Item 3	.45	.50	.62	.49	.42	.50	.37	.48
Item 4	.55	.50	.75	.43	.47	.50	.34	.48
Item 5	.37	.48	.62	.49	.37	.48	.21	.41
Item 6	.77	.42	.80	.40	.89	.31	.76	.43

*Between and within-group development*

Table 2 presents the results of the independent samples *t*-test for the skills of interpreting and relating. At the 5% significance level, the pre-test results indicate that the null hypothesis cannot be rejected, as the *p*-value (Sig. = 0.11) exceeds the threshold of 0.05. Thus, no statistically significant difference was found between the experimental group ( $M = .52$ ) and the control group ( $M = .48$ ) prior to the intervention, despite a slight advantage in the experimental group's mean score. In contrast, the post-test results demonstrate a statistically significant difference in favor of the experimental group, whose mean score ( $M = .72$ ) was substantially higher than that of the control group ( $M = .40$ ). The *t*-test confirmed this difference as statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ; Sig. = .00). However, the calculated effect size was small (Cohen's  $d = 0.1$ ), suggesting that while the intervention had a significant effect, its magnitude was limited.

Table 2  
Between-group developments in skills of interpreting and relating across the sample groups

Independent Samples t-test					
	Group	N	Mean	Std. D	Sig.
Pre-treatment	Experimental Group	60	.5278	.20161	.11*
	Control group	38	.4863	.09701	
Post-treatment	Experimental Group	60	.7250	.18367	.00*
	Control group	38	.4079	.18050	

Building on the significant difference reported earlier, the within-group analysis revealed a marked improvement in the experimental group's performance following exposure to intercultural topics and tasks. Specifically, the experimental group's mean score increased to  $M = .72$  in the post-test, whereas the control group's performance declined, with a mean score of  $M = .40$  (see Table 3). The mean difference between pre- and post-test scores ranged from 0.09 in the control group to .19 in the experimental group. This improvement was statistically validated by the paired samples *t*-test, which yielded a *p*-value of .00 ( $p < .05$ ), confirming the significance of the change in the experimental group. Furthermore, the effect size, as measured by Cohen's  $d$ , was found to be large ( $d = -1.0$ ), indicating a substantial impact of the treatment. Conversely, the decline in the control group's performance was also statistically significant ( $p = .00 <$

.05), with a moderate effect size ( $d = 0.5$ ), suggesting a notable decrease in their skills of interpreting and relating over time without targeted intervention

Table 3

Within-group developments in skills of interpreting and relating across sample groups

Paired samples t-test						
	Group	Mean	Mean difference	Std D	t	Sig
Pre-test Score	ExG	.5278	-.19722	.19766	-7.729	.00*
Post-test Score		.7250				
Pre-test Score	CG	.5044	.09649	.18022	3.300	.00*
Post-test Score		.4079				

Overall, the students who underwent the intercultural learning experience using intercultural topics and intercultural tasks showed that they do possess the mediation skills that enable them to detect ethnocentric perspectives and conflicting interpretations, identify causes of misunderstandings and explain them, and use them to appropriately and effectively mediate between the Moroccan and the American cultures. On the basis of the findings obtained, the null hypothesis is rejected, as the learners exposed to intercultural topics and tasks outperformed those exposed to various topics and traditional comprehension activities in the area of skills of interpreting and relating.

### The quantitative analysis of learners' skills of discovery and interaction

#### *Pre & post-treatment analysis by test items*

Table 4 presents the pre-treatment mean scores across individual test items related to learners' skills of discovery and interaction in both sample groups. The descriptive statistics indicate notable variation between the groups, with instances where students in the experimental group outperformed their counterparts in the control group, and vice versa. The lowest mean scores were associated with Item 1, which assessed students' ability to employ questioning techniques to elicit the meanings and connotations of an event from American interlocutors (ExG:  $M = .38$ ; CG:  $M = .37$ ). These results suggest that both groups initially struggled with this specific interactive skill. Conversely, the highest pre-test scores were recorded for Item 4, where the control group scored  $M = .76$  and the experimental group scored  $M = .67$  on Items 3 and 4. This indicates a relatively satisfactory level of competence in recognizing the need to integrate knowledge, skills, and attitudes when responding to intercultural misunderstandings.

Post-treatment analysis revealed a clear upward trajectory in the experimental group's performance across all items related to the skills of discovery and interaction. Students demonstrated substantial improvement in applying questioning strategies to uncover cultural meanings, particularly in Item 1, suggesting enhanced awareness of pragmatic tools essential for effective intercultural communication. By contrast, the control group exhibited score fluctuations, with some declines, particularly in Items 1, 4, and 5, highlighting ongoing difficulties in employing appropriate questioning strategies and integrating intercultural competencies. Overall, the findings indicate that the experimental group experienced marked progress, particularly at the behavioral or pragmatic dimension of intercultural awareness, likely as a result of exposure to intercultural themes and tasks throughout the intervention.

Table 4  
Learners' means in the sample groups by test items prior to and after the experiment

	Experimental Group (N=60)				Control group (N=38)			
	Mean (pre)	Std. D	Mean (post)	Std. D	Mean (pre)	Std. D	Mean (post)	Std. D
Item 1	.40	.49	.80	.40	.42	.44	.26	.44
Item 2	.38	.49	.73	.44	.37	.49	.42	.50
Item 3	.67	.47	.82	.39	.61	.50	.68	.47
Item 4	.67	.47	.78	.41	.76	.50	.58	.50
Item 5	.47	.50	.60	.49	.47	.48	.34	.48

*Between and within-group development*

Table 5 presents the pre-treatment comparison of mean scores between the experimental and control groups for the skills of discovery and interaction. The initial difference was minimal and statistically non-significant, as indicated by the t-test results (Sig. = .39 > .05). However, the post-treatment analysis revealed a statistically significant difference in favor of the experimental group (Sig. = .00 < .05), suggesting that the intervention had a meaningful impact. Despite the statistical significance, the calculated effect size was small (Cohen's  $d = 0.2$ ), indicating that the magnitude of the effect was limited.

Table 5  
Between-group developments in skills of discovery and interaction across sample groups  
Independent Samples t-test

	Group	N	Mean	Std. D	Sig.
Pre-treatment	Experimental Group	60	.5167	.16173	.39*
	Control group	38	.5263	.18843	
Post-treatment	Experimental Group	60	.7467	.19438	.00*
	Control group	38	.4579	.20747	

Descriptive statistics indicated that students in the experimental group demonstrated remarkable improvement in their skills of discovery and interaction, with a post-test mean score exceeding the pre-test by 0.23. In contrast, the control group exhibited a decline, with a mean difference of 0.06. The paired samples  $t$ -test confirmed that the improvement in the experimental group was statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ; Sig. = .00), with a large effect size (Cohen's  $d = -1.21$ ), indicating a substantial impact of the intervention. Meanwhile, the decrease in the control group's performance was also statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ; Sig. = .02), though the effect size was small (Cohen's  $d = 0.3$ ). These findings suggest that the experimental group made significant gains in intercultural awareness, particularly in the domain of discovery and interaction, whereas the control group showed a regression in performance.

Table 6  
Within-group developments in skills of discovery and interaction across sample groups  
Paired samples t-test

	Group	Mean	Mean Difference	Std D	t	Sig
Pre-test Score	ExG	.5167	-.23000	.19072	-9.341	.00*
Post-test Score		.7467				
Pre-test Score	CG	.5263	.06842	.20415	2.066	.02*
Post-test Score		.4579				

Drawing on the results yielded, it can be concluded that the students in the experimental group demonstrated the ability to develop new knowledge of cultural practices and the ability to employ knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time intercultural communication and interaction. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected, suggesting that the learners exposed to intercultural topics and intercultural tasks outperformed those exposed to various topics and traditional comprehension activities in the area of skills of discovery and interaction.

#### The qualitative analysis of learners' skills of interpreting and relating

In contrast to the pre-test findings, the post-test results revealed that participants' attitudes and cultural knowledge contributed significantly to the development of mediation skills. Most participants successfully established connections between their own culture and American culture, demonstrating both the willingness and ability to mediate cultural differences. To gain deeper insights, participants were asked to reflect on their awareness of cultural relationships concerning gender, ethnicity, and non-verbal communication. Additionally, they were prompted to articulate their attitudes toward mediation and problem-solving in intercultural interactions. A concise summary of selected participant responses is presented below.

Compared to the pre-test results, one participant demonstrated increased awareness of the similarities and differences between Moroccan and American cultures, as well as a greater readiness to mediate conflicting interpretations in the post-test. This participant's response concerning ethnic similarities and differences across the two cultures is presented below:

*...There are some similarities and differences. In Morocco, there are many ethnic groups as Berbers, Jews, and Arabs. In America, they have African Americans, Asian Americans, and European Americans. For similarities, there is diversity; we have Berbers as natives, while they have native Americans as first settlers. They do have more or less similar needs and expectations from their governments, as they need an official statement recognizing them as first inhabitants of their nations while they also expect their culture to be identified as original identities...*

Given the limited time allocated for the interview, this explanation appears to capture the participant's awareness of the key similarities and differences concerning ethnicity. In contrast to the pre-test, the participant stated:

*...I would not say that I can mediate 100% but I have the capacity to mediate between them and solve the problem in a peaceful way. I can explain to both of them the*

*similarities between the Moroccan and the American culture in order to convince each one of them...*

This example further illustrates the participant's developing awareness of a fundamental mediation skill: establishing relationships. Moreover, the participant demonstrated both the willingness and capacity to mediate cultural differences. The following excerpt exemplifies the participant's recognition of similarities and differences between the two cultures:

*...We have Bojlod and Achoura, while they celebrate Halloween; we do celebrate Isra'wa Al-Mi'raj of the prophet Mohammed, whereas they have a similar event called "Ascension" as a way to remember Jesus ascension to heaven. For ethnicity, there are different ethnic groups in Morocco and America. That is why they are considered plural and multicultural societies. There is a cultural melting pot in both countries. Amazigh people in Morocco Vs. Native Americans (Indians) in America; the conflict that the minority groups have with the government is similar to that of the Amazigh in Morocco; they seek to officialise their language.*

This testimonial demonstrates a substantial development in the participant's awareness of cultural similarities. Regarding mediation, the participant expressed a clear willingness to bridge differences, stating; *"Now I can because I know about both cultures, I hold positive attitudes, I should be tolerant, accept the difference, and show openness to others."* This statement exemplifies the participant's awareness of essential mediation skills in intercultural encounters, notably possessing knowledge of both cultures and fostering positive attitudes.

### **The qualitative analysis of learners' skills of discovery and interaction**

In contrast to the pre-test, the overall post-test results were satisfactory, indicating that participants gained awareness of effective communication strategies with foreigners. To further investigate students' attitudes toward the skills of discovery and interaction, as well as their willingness and ability to engage appropriately in intercultural contexts, participants were asked to respond to two questions. The first question focused on the methods they would use to elicit information from an interlocutor to better understand new aspects of American culture. The second question invited them to reflect on a hypothetical situation and evaluate how they would respond.

Upon the completion of the experiment, the majority of the students expressed desirable attitudes. For the first question, almost the same answers were provided, as the participants showed a willingness to discover the American culture through various resources, taking into account face-to-face communication, directness and politeness, while softening the negativity of sensitive issues that might cause serious problems (e.g., religion). One of the interviewees claimed, *"... I have learnt that Americans are direct and so my intervention will be direct without beating around the bush"*, he also added *".... I would set a context for the question and then raise the issues I need him/her to respond to and finally interact using polite tool with no intention to downgrade his/her views..."* . Another participant showed his inclination towards

exhibiting openness and inquisitiveness to elicit information about the target culture. He stated,

*... Now that I am familiar with the nature of Americans, I won't hesitate to ask questions directly. However, my approach to converse with an American should be completely different from a Moroccan. By accepting the difference and being knowledgeable about their mindsets, Americans expect us to be direct and polite and try to meet their expectations of good behaviors...*

This implies that the participant developed awareness of the importance of meeting others' expectations with regard to appropriate manners. Similarly, a large number of the students exhibited willingness to initiate the conversation although the topic was very sensitive, while they were reluctant to give a complete answer to the second question as they already did in the first place. An example of incomplete answers includes a participant who expressed readiness to ask questions directly with no reference to the way she would address her question, "*Generally, I will ask questions directly because Americans are direct, as I already stated...*". Another participant declared that he would ask questions directly, but politely to avoid being offensive, "*...I will ask him directly in a polite way to avoid offending him. I should not be afraid to approach him and start a conversation with him and ask questions which will help me explore new ideas about his culture...*". Similarly, a male participant said, "*...I will ask directly in a polite way, I should know how to talk about it without offending him*". This reveals the students' willingness and ability to elicit knowledge about different connotations of an event or phenomenon from Americans. As it was the first time for them to take an interview, the interviewees were very reluctant to speak spontaneously, even though they had an answer, thereby contributing to incomplete answers in many instances. Compared to their answers on the intercultural test, their responses seemed to be satisfactory enough, indicating increased awareness and development of skills of discovery and interaction.

## DISCUSSION

### Development of learners' interpreting and relating skills

Overall, the students who underwent intercultural instruction exhibited higher order thinking skills manifested in identifying ethnocentric perspectives, interpreting and relating events in their own culture to those in the target community. Establishing relationships between cultures led them to develop an intermediary profile capable of solving cultural disputes in intercultural encounters. In this spirit, the majority of the experimental group participants were able to establish meaningful connections between Moroccan and American cultures and exhibited a growing willingness and capacity to mediate cultural differences. This suggests that effective mediation in intercultural encounters relies not only on positive attitudes but also on the possession of relevant cultural knowledge and interpretive skills. While El Hiani (2018) cautions that positive attitudes alone do not guarantee high performance or critical intercultural awareness, the current study demonstrates that, when combined with knowledge of both cultures, positive attitudes can significantly enhance mediation and interaction skills.

The results associated with the current study broadly support those in the previous studies (e.g., Gómez-Rodríguez, 2012, 2014; Karras, 2017; Maharaja, 2018; Gómez-Rodríguez, 2018; Wu & Marek, 2018) by reference to the importance of the development of attitudes (i.e., openness, respect, acceptance of cultural difference, and empathy) and sufficient intercultural knowledge in enabling students to engage and interact with people from different cultural backgrounds, and mediate differences (i.e., establishing commonalities and differences between their own and the other culture). The present study also lends support to Jin (2015) and Fernández and Pozzo (2017), who affirm that the discussion of the differences between the learners' own and the other culture enables them to develop a better understanding of the target culture and raise their awareness of their own. This knowledge would ultimately lead to effective mediation in intercultural exchanges, especially that it was revealed in the present study that sufficient knowledge reflects the ability to establish relationships between different cultures.

Although students in the control group occasionally expressed motivation to intervene in intercultural misunderstandings, their efforts lacked the interpretive depth and strategic competence required for effective mediation. Their responses indicated gaps in key skills such as comparing perspectives, identifying cultural assumptions, and articulating nuanced explanations. This underscores the importance of structured intercultural training to foster these competencies. According to Byram (1997), the intercultural speaker is defined by the ability to interpret and relate events across cultural contexts, a profile that students in the experimental group increasingly embodied, despite limitations in their background knowledge.

Unlike the results obtained in Koumachi's (2015) study, post-intervention responses indicated that students in the experimental group became capable of identifying implicit ethnocentric perspectives, explaining their cultural origins, and responding appropriately. For example, when confronted with generalizations such as "Muslims are actually not tolerant," participants chose to explain rather than dismiss or confront, demonstrating tolerance, respect, and acceptance of difference, key attitudes necessary for successful intercultural mediation. This aligns with Byram's (1997) argument that attitudes are interdependent with other *savoirs* and are crucial to effective intercultural functioning. In this spirit, Maharaja (2018) reports that communicating and mediating effectively and appropriately in cross-cultural encounters is the result of the development of empathy along with acceptance and respect of cultural differences. Compared to earlier findings (El Hiani, 2018), where second-semester students struggled to move beyond surface-level reactions in mediation, the present study shows that even first-year students can develop meaningful intercultural competence when provided with targeted instruction. While Koumachi (2015) found similar capacities among master's students, including tolerance in the face of discrimination, some participants still exhibited negative attitudes, failing to resolve cultural misunderstandings effectively. In contrast, students in the current experimental group demonstrated greater success in mediating differences by articulating informed and empathetic responses.

Furthermore, effective mediation requires the ability to diagnose cultural misunderstandings and explain them in light of both cultures' frames of reference. The students' responses reflected such skills, often employing strategies aligned with the D.I.E. model (Description, Interpretation, Evaluation). This conclusion is supported by Fujioka-Ito (2024), whose findings indicate that utilizing the OSEE<sup>1</sup> as a tool for critical evaluation of the target culture enables learners to reconsider their preconceived ideas regarding people from different cultures by observing, understanding and evaluating various cultural scenarios in light of perspectives, practices and products. Drawing on Saputra's et al (2019) results, highlighting the role of problem-oriented activities in improving critical thinking, integrating D.I.E model allowed for more engaging, critical problem-solving reflections, which in turn enabled individual learners to analyze and evaluate different perspectives before jumping to conclusions. This strategy contributed to raising students' awareness the mediation process by granting communicative opportunities to negotiate meaning, interpret and connect perspectives, and draw conclusions in light of objective intercultural conflict resolution reasoning. In the same vein, the implementation of conflict resolution strategy equally helped learners mitigate unwanted, stereotype-oriented behaviors by holding an ethnorelative perspective manifested in showing empathy, questioning ethnocentric perspectives and mediating differences from a multidimensional stand. This argument is supported by Ay et al (2019), who demonstrate the importance of conflict resolution and peer mediation in promoting peaceful, constructive engagement, characterized by compromise and the negotiation of meaning.

These findings reinforce the work of Gómez-Rodríguez and Puyal (2012), who observed that integrating reading materials with communicative tasks, such as discussions, simulations, and role-plays, enables learners to bridge cultural knowledge and practice (see also Gómez-Rodríguez, 2014; Manjet et al., 2017; Gómez-Rodríguez, 2018; Engelking, 2018). The current study supports this claim, as students who engaged in interactive intercultural tasks developed more comprehensive mediation abilities, despite occasional challenges in interpersonal communication. They were also able to identify and explain cultural misunderstandings, recognize ethnocentric biases, and mediate appropriately between Moroccan and American perspectives. These characteristics are essential in the making of the intercultural speaker/mediator profile (see Byram, 1997; Rubenfeld & Clément, 2012; Stathopoulou, 2015). Overall, it is reaffirmed that the students provided with sufficient intercultural instruction through themed readings and communicative tasks demonstrated a clear advancement in their skills of interpreting and relating, marking a substantial progress compared to the control group.

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<sup>1</sup> OSEE tool is comprised of four steps: (1) observe what is happening in visual aids (e.g., pictures); (2) state objectively what is happening to the visual aids using descriptive language; (3) explore different explanations for what is happening while practicing interpersonal and interpretative skills; and (4) evaluate which explanation is the most likely one about the visual aids.

### **Critical analysis of learners' discovery and interaction skills**

By and large, students in the experimental group showed significant progress as to the skills of discovery and interaction. This finding is manifested in their willingness to engage in questioning to uncover cultural meanings, particularly regarding American norms and taboos. While some hesitated to approach sensitive topics, others preferred self-guided learning or indirect strategies, reflecting a mix of openness and cultural caution. This tendency highlights students' awareness of potential cultural clashes and their attempts to navigate these sensitively, balancing curiosity with politeness. Following the results obtained in the present study, the experimental group demonstrated a heightened awareness of appropriate verbal and non-verbal behaviors, particularly in everyday contexts such as dining in an American home. While students were generally open to adapting to American customs, this openness was often framed by their adherence to Islamic values, which sometimes constrained full cultural engagement. However, their awareness of cultural difference enabled them to respond with tolerance and respect, suggesting that the development of positive attitudes, such as openness and curiosity, mitigates potential stress or conflict in intercultural situations (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Kim, 1988; Byram, 1997). In alignment with Karras (2017) and Tran, Admiraal and Saab (2019), the findings associated with the present study suggest that the skills of discovery could possibly be improved, especially when the learners develop positive attitudes towards cultural diversity, namely curiosity and respect of cultural differences. Fernández and Pozzo (2017) also demonstrate that attitudes are pivotal for intercultural communication, arguing that when students have a tendency to value native speakers as a reliable source of information, they can easily inquire about the connotation of a phenomenon from them by asking for a confirmation of a certain preconception.

Further evidence from students' responses to test items demonstrated their improved ability to use appropriate questioning techniques and to show cultural sensitivity. In line with Koumachi's (2015) findings, students preferred direct yet respectful inquiry and avoided culturally inappropriate behaviors, especially in relation to taboo topics. However, unlike Koumachi's participants, who sometimes responded with rigidity when American behaviors clashed with Moroccan-Islamic norms, students in the current study exhibited more flexible and respectful responses, indicating an enhanced ability to mediate cultural misunderstandings without offense.

Nevertheless, findings also suggest that knowledge and positive attitudes alone are insufficient for effective interaction. Very few students struggled to manage cultural conflicts appropriately, highlighting gaps in their interactional skills. This supports the argument that intercultural training is essential in equipping learners with the practical tools needed to behave appropriately in complex intercultural encounters. The use of experiential tasks (e.g., critical incidents, role-plays) was found to be instrumental in developing this awareness (Gómez-Rodríguez, 2014; Nie, 2017; Manjet et al., 2017; Tran, Admiraal, & Saab, 2019). Jin (2015) demonstrates that social engagement through social platforms encourages individuals to discover new knowledge about the American culture directly or indirectly through the use of appropriate questioning

techniques. This implies that the more the individual experiences cultural differences, the more eager he/she becomes to discover the unfamiliar (see also Fernández & Pozzo, 2017).

It appears that the implementation of intercultural courses utilising intercultural communicative tasks, especially role-play and critical incident activities, would develop the learners' willingness and ability to discover new knowledge directly from people who live in the American context, which is an immersion context (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002). This has only been possible during students' study abroad programs, where the students have direct contact with people of different cultural backgrounds. In alignment with Heinzmann's et al (2015) results, which indicate that study abroad programs have an impact on the development of the learners' willingness to learn from and engage with people of the target culture, the outcomes relative to the present study reveal that employing an intercultural learning approach within an EFL artificial environment would also develop the learners' attitudes towards cultural diversity, which in turn lead to the development of intercultural skills. This is equally evident in Uyun and Warsah's (2022) findings, which highlight the need for cognitive and conitive domains to foster intercultural sensitivity by offering an intercultural-like/multicultural learning experience.

However, supporting the present study findings, Chau and Truong's (2018) view the effective pedagogical integration of intercultural materials within an EFL classroom would highly likely bridge this gap by offering meaningful, simulated intercultural encounters (see also Dimitrov et al., 2014). When properly designed, these materials can promote learners' engagement and reflection on cultural identity, and encourage negotiation of meaning, thereby enabling students to develop key components of intercultural communicative competence without physical contact. By doing this, intercultural tasks can function as a pedagogical substitute for immersion, supporting learners' discovery and interaction skills in context-constrained educational settings.

Contrary to Koumachi's (2015) findings, the present study demonstrated that the experimental group understood the importance of integrating knowledge, skills, and attitudes to engage effectively with American interlocutors. Towards an intercultural profile, participants showed readiness to tolerate misunderstandings, explain their cultural norms politely, and express empathy. Many were eager to explore unfamiliar cultural aspects, and their ability to identify and respond to causes of dysfunction demonstrated an emerging capacity for intercultural mediation (see Byram, 1997). This subsequently shows the value of adopting an intercultural pedagogy to encourage transformative learning. These findings corroborate those of Fernández and Pozzo (2017), Karras (2017) and Tran, Admiraal and Saab (2019) on the importance of intercultural-related tasks in boosting interaction engagement. In light of the discussion above, it is realized that the students who were subject to an intercultural training fueled with themed readings and communicative tasks demonstrated good mastery of skills of interpreting and relating, suggesting a significant improvement compared to the control group.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, the findings indicated that learners in the experimental group significantly outperformed those in the control group in both interpreting and relating and discovery and interaction skills. These findings underscore the urgent need for incorporating the intercultural dimension into the Moroccan educational curriculum. To ensure successful implementation, intercultural courses must be guided by clear, experience-based educational objectives that integrate learners' own cultures, emphasize meaningful content, and employ reflective and experiential learning activities. They equally require the use of authentic cultural materials and real-world scenarios, offering learners opportunities to navigate intercultural situations in context. Given the value of intercultural communicative tasks in fostering awareness, instructors are encouraged to use role-plays, simulations, critical incidents, and group discussions. Group discussions foster reflection on cultural issues and enhance cultural self-awareness, while critical incidents help students analyze and evaluate cultural practices from multiple perspectives. These tasks should be grounded in constructivist approaches, such as inquiry-based learning, dialogic pedagogy, and the D.I.E. framework (Description, Interpretation, Evaluation), all of which promote knowledge construction through social interaction. However, without addressing systemic challenges such as overcrowded classrooms and limited resources, intercultural education will remain difficult to implement effectively. This challenge triggers the potential for creating a socially interactive classroom environment which could enable students to build intercultural competence by solving problems, engaging in reflection, and forming meaningful cultural connections.

Reading materials, when used strategically, play a pivotal role in exposing learners to critical prompts and cultural dilemmas that provoke evaluative thinking. In line with findings from this study, academic reading should evolve from a passive reading activity into a platform for developing intercultural awareness through thematically rich texts and experiential learning. To shift focus from lower-order reading skills, commonly emphasized in earlier educational stages (Nadori, 2020), toward higher-order thinking, intercultural materials must be carefully selected and embedded within well-designed intercultural tasks. These efforts require instructors with intercultural competence and pedagogical expertise. Accordingly, professional training for teachers and syllabus designers is vital to equip them with effective strategies for fostering intercultural awareness in EFL contexts. Moreover, teaching practices must undergo continuous reflection to ensure alignment with learners' evolving needs. Instructors should carefully consider how to help students develop an intercultural lens, encompassing appropriate attitudes, cultural knowledge, and communicative skills. Teachers with an intercultural profile should move beyond the delivery of objective, surface-level cultural facts (shallow learning) to foster subjective cultural understanding (deep learning). Lastly, assessment practices must align with pedagogical goals, ensuring that intercultural learning activities are meaningfully and systematically evaluated.

As is the case, any research study is likely to have shortcomings that could affect the results in a way or another. In this respect, the present study is subject to several

limitations. Although the length of the reading texts was carefully adjusted to align with students' proficiency levels and expectations, learners were not always willing to engage in pre-class reading, which resulted in a substantial amount of reading being conducted during class time. Consequently, the considerable time devoted to reading texts and related activities constrained the opportunities available for role-play and simulation tasks. As a result, many students were not sufficiently afforded opportunities to physically demonstrate their mediation and interaction skills, which may have led to less robust outcomes. Moreover, class size emerged as a determining factor that limited learners' exposure to the intercultural activities implemented, despite deliberate efforts to involve the majority of students through collaborative techniques such as jigsaw activities. Regular and sustained participation in such activities would likely enable learners to more effectively develop and consolidate the targeted skills. In light of these limitations, future research is encouraged to exert greater control over variables that may negatively affect experimental outcomes, particularly class size, time allocation, and text length. Given the complexity of intercultural communicative competence as a construct, subsequent studies should adopt a multi-method procedure, incorporating instruments such as learner portfolios and observation checklists to capture latent variables influencing the effectiveness of the treatment. Additionally, future research should explore the integration of artificial intelligence as a *third space* for fostering intercultural mediation and interaction skills. It is further recommended that attention should be given to the pedagogical value of AI-mediated tools in relation to the materials employed in the present study, with a view to examining the extent to which these tools yield comparable or enhanced effects.

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## APPENDICES

Table 1

Levene's test for skills of interpreting and relating across the sample groups

Means	F	Sig.
Equal variances assumed	.081	.777
Equal variances not assumed		

Table 2

Levene's test for skills of interpreting and relating across the sample groups

Means	F	Sig.
Equal variances assumed	.175	.677
Equal variances not assumed		