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## Moroccan EFL Learners' Identity: Does It Reflect the Profile of the 'Intercultural Speaker'?

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**Abstract:** The process of globalization has brought a number of modern issues and perspectives to the landscape of foreign language education including influences on EFL learners' identity. Being exposed to local cultures together with foreign cultures raises critical questions vis-à-vis identity construction (Galajda, 2011; Guilherme, 2002; Houghton, 2013). Besides, as Nižegorodcew (2011) argues, questioning learners' identity as simultaneously speakers of different national languages and English as a lingua franca (ELF) is at the heart of EFL concerns. Hence, much effort is highly recommended to investigate EFL learners' identity in order to keep abreast of the growing issues including intercultural citizenship (Byram, 2009). In light of these controversial issues, the present paper provides a qualitative analysis about Moroccan EFL learners' identity that reflects the desired profile of the 'intercultural speaker'. The analysis is based on Byram's framework of ICC (1997) that stresses mainly the ability of drawing on different cultural realities to highlight common issues and phenomena. Also, the paper aims at describing the development of the aforementioned identity among Moroccan EFL undergraduate learners. This paper, therefore, contributes to the extant literature on identity and intercultural communication.

**Keywords:** Identity; (T)EFL; Intercultural speaker; Moroccan EFL learners; Implications.

### 1. Introduction

The field of foreign language education has seen unprecedented developments during the last two decades due to the immense pressure of the rapid change of the world. The effects of globalization have reshaped the role of the twenty-first century learner and rethought some basic concepts such as intercultural citizenship, cosmopolitanism and global identity. Kramsch (1993), for example, argues that the basic underpinnings of identity need to be reintroduced given the frequent engagements of learners with various cultural identities especially via the virtual world. She adds that the surrounding conditions of the 'third space' <sup>1</sup> place the learner in an intricate connection between his/her knowledge background about different cultures and the concrete interaction with people from those cultures in real life scenes.

By the same token, many interculturalists reconsidered the complex nature of culture by expanding its traditional view, which restricts the concept to static and famous products of a given culture, to an active and dialogic interaction between people from different cultural backgrounds. This shift paved the ground to rethink the status of identity in view of the frequent collision of multiple cultural identities during these interactions.

It is, then, within the post-modern orientation of cultural studies in foreign language education that the paper at hand revolves around. It is comprised of five sections. The first section sheds light on the theoretical framework of the study. The second section goes through the methodology of the study, namely setting and participants, data collection procedures and data analysis. The third section presents the results accompanied with an analysis of the research findings. It is divided into three major themes: ability to discuss one's experience of living in a different/foreign community in longer phases of acceptance and rejection, ability to mediate between conflicting cultural practices, and Moroccan EFL learners' sense of belonging. The fourth section refers to some implications drawn based on the major findings. The last section describes.

<sup>1</sup> The concept of the 'third space' was introduced by Homi Bhabha and reintroduced first in the area of foreign language education (FLE) by Claire Kramsch. The latter argues that learners experience culture when they interact with each other in real life situations. This is due to the fact that culture is defined, from Kramsch's viewpoint, in terms of the dialogic communication between people during concrete situations.

## 2. Theoretical Background

Interestingly, identity construction in today's intricate world has been a major subject of many scholars in the area of TEFL (e.g. (Askham, 2008; Houghton, 2013; Moloney, 2009; Sercu, 2006; Waldhubel, 2014; Zarrinabadi and Haidary, 2014). Moloney (2009), for example, argues for the centrality of intercultural competence in developing learners' ability to negotiate their membership of different cultural groups. This goes hand in hand with Byram (1997) claim that this competence plays a very prominent role in negotiating multiple cultural identities. Therefore, there is a strong advocacy of the teaching of intercultural competence and intercultural communicative competence in various fields including English as a foreign language (EFL) (Sercu, 2006).

The strong relationship between ICC and identity, in its contemporary perception, lies in the urgent need to interact appropriately and effectively with people with different identities. Ting-Toomey (1999, 2005), citing (Ting-Toomey, 2009), introduces Intercultural Identity-based Competence as a useful goal for foreign language education. It simply refers to "the optimal integration of knowledge, mindfulness, and communication skills in managing problematic interaction scenes appropriately, effectively, and adaptively" (p. 101). Knowledge, in this context, refers to knowledge about one's own and foreign cultures and the relationship between them. This can be facilitated through the component of 'mindfulness', which necessitates activating explicitly one's attention to notice how the differences occur. Furthermore, these abilities must meet three major goals: *appropriateness* which stresses the importance of respecting of the socio-cultural conventions of the target culture, *effectiveness* which highlights the objective of reaching the mutual goals of both interlocutors out of a given conversation, *adaptation* stresses one's ability to accommodate to the needs of the interlocutor.

As a result, the role of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) extends the mere aim of reaching the native-like fluency, and gives priority to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds placing the 'intercultural speaker'<sup>2</sup> as the most desired model of EFL learners. Byram (1997) describes this speaker as the one who is aware of the multi-faceted nature of identity and the elastic nature of cultural identities in intercultural scenes. He/she is the one who is able to recognize intercultural conflicts and mediate between two or more cultural beliefs/practices. In the same vein, Guilherme (2002) points out that "the critical intercultural speaker" is not a cosmopolitan being who floats over cultures, but someone committed to turning intercultural encounters into intercultural relationships whereby s/he deliberately exposes herself/himself to networks of meanings and forces and reflects critically upon them" (p. 129). It is clear, then, that the responsibility of the 'intercultural speaker' in the globalized world is much bigger than the role of learners as imitators of native speakers.

Houghton (2013) proposes the ID model that facilitates the process of developing students' ICC including identity-development by providing some educational stages for learning purposes and materials design. The model overlaps, to a large extent, with Byram (1997) educational objectives of ICC and introduces five stages:

- a. Analysis of self: this includes one's effort to reflect on one's culture and social identity.
- b. Analysis of other: this sheds light on learners' need to know about foreign cultural values and products.
- c. Critical analysis: this involves processes of identifying similarities and differences between one's own and foreign cultures.
- d. Critical evaluation: this stage is similar to the previous stage but it necessitates a reference to an explicit criterion that makes the person aware of his/her ideologies.
- e. Identity-Development: it is also called *savoir transformer*. It is concerned with learners' ability to flexibly change in response to the interlocutor, which includes, in turn, one's consciousness about when and how to adapt to the interlocutor. In other words, this stage stresses one's ability to go smoothly through all the previous stages.

The stages are deemed useful educational processes that serve assessment and teaching purposes. Yet, the role of teachers is still complex given the needed training and awareness of some deep issues of identity including national identity, global identity and international citizenship. Ortaçtepe (2015) investigates the identity of some teachers in the United States and declares that their language socialization is marked with 3 identity investments: (1) and experienced EFL teacher, (2) an L2 user, and (3) a burgeoning scholar (p. 107). Ortaçtepe (2015) concluded that the teachers' profiles reflect the post-modernist views of identity as their identities were dynamic, dialogic, situated, and multiple.

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<sup>2</sup> "The original coining of the phrase intercultural speaker was a deliberate attempt to distance the notion of intercultural competence from the cultural competences of a native speaker" (Byram, 2009, p. 396)

### 3. Methods/Methodology

#### 3.1. Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences of three Moroccan public universities: Mohammed First University, Mohammed V University and Ibn Zohr University. The choice of these universities was based on a systematic random sampling, which considered the geographical distance between Moroccan universities. The starting point was Mohammed First University and the last one was Ibn Zohr University with an interval of 538 Kilometers where Mohammed V University is nearly located. Moreover, 45 students from the three universities participated in this study (15 from each group). A stratified random sampling was the statistical criterion in choosing the participants from these academic levels. This is useful when the population is divided into different groups with different characteristics. In this study, the academic level was the main factor because of the different characteristics of the three levels (S2, S4 and S6). Hence, a random sampling was chosen from each group.

#### 3.2. Data Collection Procedure

Interview was used as the major data collection procedure. In view of the complexity of identity construction vis-à-vis ICC, a semi-structured interview is the most appropriate type because it frames the data by predetermined questions and provides enough space to add extra information at once. As a result, the participants were asked three major questions:

- a. Could you please tell us about one of your experiences of living in a different cultural environment? Describe your stages of adaptation to those new environments.
- b. Imagine you are involved in a situation in which an American greets a Chinese person with a handshake while this Chinese person keeps a little distance and holds his/her hands together as another way of greeting. You notice that the American is dissatisfied with the Chinese way of greeting. What might you say to the people involved in this interaction? Why?
- c. If you compare your own culture and American and/or British culture, do you feel that you belong to one culture more than the other? Why?

All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim for data analysis. The analyses were categorized into themes in accordance to some educational objectives of Byram's description of ICC (1997).

#### 3.3. Data Analysis

The study adopts a qualitative analysis that focuses primarily on the content of the participants' interactions. According to Rugg and Petre (2007), content analysis is concerned mainly with "what is said in a text, how it is said, and how often it's said" (p. 152). The answers then were categorized in the form of a text to facilitate the process of determining clear ideas and themes. The status quo followed criteria of understanding the content, the way it was expressed, and the frequency of mentioning particular ideas and words or expressions by the respondents. These criteria reflect, to a large extent, Rugg and Petre's perception of content analysis.

### 4. Results and Discussion

The results can be divided into three major themes. The first theme sheds light on learners' experience of living in different/foreign communities that are characterized by different cultural environments. The second theme highlights learners' ability to mediate between conflicting cultural practices. The last theme describes learners' sense of belonging at the level of cultural identity.

#### 4.1. Ability to Discuss One's Experience of Living in a Different/Foreign Community in Longer Phases of Acceptance and Rejection

This theme is described by Byram (1997) as one of the most important components that reflect the characteristics of the 'intercultural speaker'. In this respect, the majority of S2 students had no deep negotiation of their experiences in foreign communities. Apart from a very few cases, the majority discussed directly their likes and dislikes without mentioning a detailed explanation of their attitudes. Additionally, some could not notice cultural differences during their residence in foreign/different communities. Following Meier (2014), negotiation skills are intrinsic in the development of ICC because of the need to place intercultural events in longer phases of analyzing and negotiating unfamiliar practices. One of the distinguished opinions was expressed by a Moroccan student who spent her childhood in Iraq:

It was very difficult to the whole family not just me. My dad lived in Iraq for more than 23 years. When I came here (Morocco), I was 17 years old. When I went to school at that time, *my teachers were asking me*

*so stupid questions* (expressed loudly and with frustration), they were asking me questions like: what do we call this? Why are you wearing this? My accent was difficult because it was a mix of Iraqi and Jordan accent. They actually made me feel like a strange person. *My classmates were looking at my hair repeatedly* (expressed with a big surprise) because in the Iraqi culture a girl should have a long hair. The girls were asking me: is this real hair or just a fake?! (Laughing) It was difficult for me to adapt because they were just calling me “Iraqia” in the street. Because it was so strange for me, I asked my mom about the matter. I still remember also one of our neighbors told me: it’s so expensive to have a long hair like this because of shampoo and hair conditions and bla bla bla... it was a difficult experience and I felt that they were stupid but I get used to them, that’s it.

In spite of the unusual questions and reactions of many people to the participant, she tried to understand these reactions by asking her mother (I asked my mom about the matter).

The tendency of providing quick judgments, likes and dislikes was remarked on among S4 students except a few participants who could draw on their experiences in longer phases of describing the cultural differences before stating their adaptation. One of the participants who could not discuss the cultural differences chose to interact and live only with people who belong to his original community:

I came from Beni Bouayach (The suburbs of AL Hoceima city) to Rabat a few years ago and I found it really difficult to adapt at the very beginning. I had some problems in learning the language and to adapt to some new behaviors, which are totally different from the place I used to live in. I realized that People in the north are more social. I decided to live my life and to find friends from my city (AL Hoceima) and people who are near to my mother culture.

However, S6 students showed good indications of negotiation skills by describing different stages of living in foreign/different communities including identification of differences, describing the place of some cultural practices in the target community and expressing direct acceptance or rejection of those practices as stated in the following example:

I am from Sahara but I was born in Rabat and I live in this city (Rabat). I travelled a few years ago to Sahara and I realized that there were very traditional things. For example, you don’t have to talk loudly with old people or even in front of them. I was shocked because I used to talk freely and without any limitation. But, I liked the idea because I asked a lot of friends there and just realized that it’s something related to respect. So, I liked it in this way because respect is a great value for me.

I live here in Rabat, but I’m from Taza (a Moroccan city located in the Northeast). Whenever I go there, I discover many things. For example, people in Taza wake up early and they are very friendly. Also, they respect women a lot. For instance, when women go to ceremonies such as weddings, their husbands insist that they need to be away from any suspicion (laughing loudly). You see, they can’t accept that their women can see or talk with any man. Of course, at the beginning I was shocked but I could adapt with their way of living to the extent that I have an idea to build a house there and may be live there, why not! Now I really love their culture.

It is noticeable that both participants were surprised at the unfamiliar practices of the other cultural groups at the very beginning, but they adapted to these cultures after being provided with the status of these practices in their social context. Adaptation, accordingly, came after different stages of discovering, understanding and evaluating. This flexibility of placing events in longer phases is of paramount importance in the development of ICC from Byram (1997) viewpoint.

Thus, S6 students have useful abilities of ethnography as they benefit from their experiences of living in foreign/other communities as fertile platforms to raise issues of cultural differences. The place of ethnography, as stated by Liddicoat and Scarino (2013), remains fundamental in the intercultural dimension of FLE.

## 4.2. Ability to Mediate Between Conflicting Cultural Practices

The act of mediating is central to ICC given the great role of the ‘intercultural speaker’ in explaining reasonably the sources of conflicts between speakers. The ability of mediating, therefore, entails a direct reference to both cultures and, additionally, producing a third text explaining the conflicting situation as a cultural phenomenon. In this respect, the participants were asked to intervene as a third party on a conflicting situation in which an American and a Chinese citizen greet each other in different ways. Thus, the status quo made the American nervous. The task was challenging for S2 students who were focusing on the cultural shock on the part of the American citizen as suggested by the following participants:

I will tell the American that he/she must respect the Chinese culture because Chinese people greet like that. Pufffff!! (Showing confusion) I don’t know may be I will say this.

I will laugh that's it! (Hesitation 10-15 seconds) I will greet them in both ways. I don't know that's my idea. Hence, their perception of the situation was shallow and directed only at reacting upon the feeling of nervousness.

However, S4 students expressed more readiness to explain the conflicting situation drawing on both cultures. For example, some found it relevant to greet both speakers in both ways of greeting to stress the difference. As a result, more awareness of cultural differences was revealed.

This awareness was more frequent among S6 students who stressed the impact of cultural differences in many examples. Some expanded their explanations by shedding light on the act of greeting as a cultural value that carries underlying symbols for social environments. For example, some could go deeply into the meaning of greeting as a universal act, which aims primarily at fostering the value of peace and solidarity:

I will explain that the situation has nothing to do with respect, but it is just a matter of difference in the way of greeting. The ways are different but it is all about respect. May be there are a number of differences in terms of the way of greeting across the world, but if we look deeply about the meaning and importance of greeting, we will certainly find out that greetings seek peace and mutual respect. So, it should be taken into consideration before looking at the differences in terms of performing greetings.

I have to try to explain that it is a matter of cultural difference. I will explain the situation using gestures to greet them both in their ways to avoid confusion. So, may be doing that concretely in both ways of greeting will solve the problem or clash.

It is worthy of notice that this ability to produce a comprehensive and complex analysis of the conflict is a key characteristics in the profile of 'intercultural speakers' as mediators (Rubinfeld and Clément, 2012; Stathopoulou, 2015). Hence, the development among S2, S4 and S6 students was evident at the level of explaining and mediating between conflicting cultural beliefs/practices.

### 4.3. Moroccan EFL learners' sense of belonging

The last theme was an attempt to look into Moroccan EFL learners' sense of belonging. They were asked to elaborate on their sense of belonging when they compare their Moroccan culture with American/British culture. In this context, it should be noted that the 'intercultural speaker' is the one who draws on different cultural realities to highlight cultural diversity with reference to the emerging issues that stem from this diversity. In other words, the 'intercultural speaker' has a neutral and individual identity that brings together different cultures and recognizes diversity as a new culture. This is, from Byram (2009) viewpoint, the most desired outcome that can mitigate the effects of globalization and prepare global citizens. As a result, the majority from S2 and S4 groups were influenced either by Moroccan culture or American culture. For example, S2 students found it axiomatic that they belong to their Moroccan culture given that they acquired its aspects since childhood and it reflects their religious background:

Ohh, of course I belong to my culture the Moroccan culture. I was born in this country. If you live in Morocco many years, how would you feel that you belong to another culture?! That's quite normal!

Personally, I feel that I belong to the American culture more. I like their culture, I see their culture through Media, and also I ask some of my American students. I think that my professional career as a student in the English department makes me feel like that I belong to the American culture, because I'm not learning only their language, but I learn a lot about their culture. I feel that I'm affected by their culture, lifestyle, and other things.

Other participants from S4 group declared their belonging to the American more than the Moroccan culture because of their admiration for some aspects of the American culture such as individual privacy. On the basis of the present evidence, S2 and S4 students do not possess the desired profile of the 'intercultural speaker' and global citizen given the huge emphasis on a single cultural reality. In addition, S4 students tend to embrace the American culture more than S2 students by virtue of their advanced experience in English studies:

I feel that I belong to the American culture because I like relying on myself. I love to do things alone: travel alone, live alone, and to be a reliable person. I feel that I'm different from people here (Morocco), that's why I feel that I belong to the American culture more than any other culture. Simply, I like to be free.

I feel that I'm a Moroccan only at the level of nationality, and I feel that I'm an American in terms of my thinking. The American culture gives the value to the individual and they respect human rights.

To be honest, I feel that I belong to the American culture more than my own culture. I love their culture, they are open-minded and their lifestyle is amazing. But, I respect my culture. *I belong to it, it is mine* (hesitant), but I feel that I belong to Americans.

It is worth mentioning that a few students from S4 group declared their belonging to both cultures depending on what is relevant in each culture. For example, it was declared by a participant that individual privacy is something valuable in the American culture, but the Moroccan identity including the religious background is also important.



The present fact shows how some S4 students recognize the value of diversity but without reference to ideological orientations or deep issues of culture.

In this respect, some participants from S6 group raised deep issues of context and international identity. Remarkably, some declared that people and context determine the way culture is brought to the surface. Also, another participant from S6 group suggested that learning different languages presupposes learning many cultures. Thus, the status quo helps to get an international view to the world. Interestingly, some S6 students were aware of the in-between issues of different cultures, and more importantly, they were cognizant of the effects of their Moroccan culture and American culture on the shape of their worldview:

I think that learning many languages means also learning many cultures, and this gives a better understanding of the world. So, I feel that I belong to everywhere. I'm an international person because I feel that I adapt to people from all over the world.

Sometimes you can't decide which culture you are belonging to more. We are exposed to many things about American and British cultures, but we should admit also that we belong to our country Morocco. For example, when Americans discuss some topics, you just feel that you are belonging to them (Laughing).

But, when I'm among my family I feel that I'm a Moroccan with my Moroccan culture. It's a mixture you know! That's it.

Yet again, the development is easily noticed through the three levels (S2, S4 and S6) in terms of analyzing the concept of identity and sense of belonging. As a case in point, S2 students revealed generally a shallow understanding of their sense of belonging in view of their frequent reference to their own culture, whereas S4 students had frequent reference to the American culture as the culture that represents their identity. However, S6 students generally provided good explanations concerning the analysis of different worldviews and cultural realities. Some could discuss the universality of identity and the personal capacity to deal with all cultures and identities to develop critically a neutral identity.

## 5. Implications

The findings of this study lead to draw a number of implications. First, the majority of the participants revealed a shallow negotiation of their experiences of living in different/foreign communities. At this stage, the role of ethnography as a powerful method and technique in raising explicitly one's awareness of the cultural beliefs and practices of foreigners is crucial. Roberts (2001) and Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) argue for the impactful place of ethnographic skills in learners' academic repertoire. Second, the majority of the participants faced challenges in mediating between conflicting cultural phenomena. This might be attributed to the fact that many are influenced by the huge exposure to the American/British culture. It is, therefore, of paramount importance to provide learners with concrete and challenging situation to mediate between their own cultural practices and foreign practices. Third, the perception of identity is narrow, to a certain degree, for many Moroccan EFL undergraduate learners in that numerous participants were either influenced by their own culture or American/British culture. As a result, highlighting differences and cultural diversity is a must that should give an equal status to local and foreign cultures in EFL curricula. Last, since the analysis showed a development among the three undergraduate levels, the teaching process has to be divided into graduate levels of complexity depending on the level of students' perception and analysis.

## 6. Limitations

As the case with many research studies, some shortcomings should be brought to the surface. The study used a single data collection procedure. In this regard, the use of multiple data collection procedures may provide further evidence on the issue from various perspectives. In addition, the themes used in this study were taken from Byram (1997) model. At this stage, there are different models of intercultural competence which focus on identity (e.g. Bennett (2009)). Furthermore, although the participants were included from three Moroccan public universities, 5 participants from each academic level may not be sufficient to yield very strong data.

## 7. Conclusion

The present paper attempted to provide a qualitative analysis of the desired profile of the 'intercultural speaker'. To this end, three major themes were taken from Byram (1997) model of ICC, which distinguished the 'intercultural speaker' from the speakers aiming at reaching the native-like fluency of English. Although reaching this fluency is part of the ICC dimension, it is not the ultimate goal of the 'intercultural speaker' since the place of cultural diversity is peripheral. The findings of this paper proved that Moroccan EFL undergraduate learners still face challenges in

meeting the crucial characteristics of the aforementioned speaker. Yet, as has been argued by many interculturalists, the development in negotiating, mediating and discussing the concept of cultural identity occurs in a developmental process and, consequently, this was noticed among the three undergraduate levels. Hence, expanding the horizons of learners in terms of negotiating and discussing different cultural identities must be part and parcel of the twenty-first century classroom (Askham, 2008; Corbett, 2003; Houghton, 2013).

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