



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



## Intercultural communication skills and student mobility in Morocco

Said Dadda \*, Amel Nejjari and Ibrahim Belmir

*Didactics, Literacies and Mediations Research Team. Abdelmalek Essaâdi University, Morocco.*

Global Journal of Engineering and Technology Advances, 2024, 20(03), 165–170

Publication history: Received on 07 August 2024; revised on 16 September 2024; accepted on 19 September 2024

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/gjeta.2024.20.3.0175>

### Abstract

This study examines intercultural communication competence among international students in Morocco, taking as a sample the Ecole Nationale des Sciences Appliquées (ENSA) in Tétouan. The survey of 26 students assessed six key aspects: intercultural communication skills, culture shock, general satisfaction, cultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity and language proficiency. The results show that 58% of students have a high level of intercultural competence. Culture shock is evenly distributed between high, moderate and low levels. Overall satisfaction is high, with 80% of students satisfied with their experience. Cultural awareness and intercultural sensitivity are also high among the majority of participants. In linguistic terms, there was significant progress in Arabic, while the level of French was generally high. The study highlights the crucial importance of intercultural communication skills in the success of international student mobility in Morocco. It highlights areas requiring particular attention, such as support for students experiencing significant culture shock and the continuous improvement of language skills. Despite certain limitations, in particular the size of the sample and the focus on a single institution, this research provides insight into the role of intercultural communication in the success of international student mobility in Morocco.

**Keywords:** Intercultural communication; International student mobility; Higher education in Morocco; Intercultural skills

### 1. Introduction

International student mobility is a growing phenomenon in a globalized world, offering students the opportunity for an enriching academic and cultural experience [1]. Every year, millions of students cross borders to pursue their studies abroad, attracted by reputable institutions or by the discovery of new cultures [2]. However, this immersion in a different cultural environment poses challenges for intercultural communication [3].

Intercultural communication competence is essential for facilitating the cultural adaptation, academic success and personal development of international students [4; 5]. It encompasses aspects such as cultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity and linguistic competence [6]. Universities and educational institutions play a crucial role in supporting and developing these skills, enabling students to benefit fully from their experience abroad and become competent global citizens who respect cultural differences [7; 8].

In the Moroccan context, international student mobility has undergone a significant historical evolution. Once mainly a destination for Moroccan students going abroad, Morocco has become, thanks to the development of its higher education institutions, a popular destination for international students, attracting students of various nationalities. This cultural diversity offers a unique opportunity to broaden academic and cultural horizons, but also poses challenges in terms of intercultural communication [9].

\*Corresponding author: Said Dadda

Located at the crossroads between Africa, Europe and the Middle East, Morocco has become a popular destination for international students. The country's cultural diversity, combined with its high-quality educational institutions, offers a unique opportunity for students of various nationalities to broaden their academic and cultural horizons. However, this international mobility poses challenges in terms of intercultural communication. Student mobility in Morocco often involves immersion in a highly diverse cultural environment, marked by Arab, Berber, African and European influences. This situation can lead to misunderstandings, conflicts and difficult adaptation if intercultural communication skills are not sufficiently developed. The central problem of this study is to understand how intercultural communication skills influence the experience of international students in Morocco, and what strategies can be implemented to improve these skills. This paper will examine intercultural communication competence among international students in Morocco, assessing its importance, specific challenges and strategies for improvement.

### 1.1. Intercultural communication competence

Intercultural communication skills encompass a complex set of competencies that enable individuals to interact and communicate effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds [10]. These skills are increasingly crucial in our globalized world, where intercultural interactions have become commonplace in various spheres of life, including business, education and personal relationships. Cultural awareness is at the heart of intercultural communication skills. It involves developing a thorough understanding of one's own cultural context and prejudices, as well as recognizing and appreciating the cultural frameworks of others [11]. Cultural awareness extends beyond superficial knowledge of customs and traditions; it requires an understanding of the underlying values, beliefs and worldviews that shape communication styles and behaviors [12]. Empathy is another essential element of intercultural communication. It involves the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, especially those from different cultural backgrounds. This skill helps bridge cultural gaps by enabling individuals to perceive situations from a variety of cultural perspectives, thereby reducing misunderstandings and conflicts. Adaptability and flexibility are essential qualities for effective intercultural communication. These skills involve the ability to adapt one's communication style and behavior to different cultural contexts. This may include modifying verbal and non-verbal communication, adapting to different concepts of time and space, or adjusting to different social norms and etiquettes. Language mastery, even if not strictly necessary, can greatly enhance intercultural communication. This doesn't always mean mastery of several languages, but rather an understanding of how language shapes thought and expression across cultures. It also includes the ability to communicate effectively even when there is no common language, using strategies such as simplification, paraphrasing and non-verbal cues. Awareness of non-verbal communication is crucial, as gestures, facial expressions and body language can vary considerably between cultures. What may be considered polite in one culture may be offensive in another. Understanding these differences can help avoid unintentional communication problems. Active listening is particularly important in cross-cultural contexts. This involves not only hearing the words spoken, but also paying attention to tone, context and underlying meanings that may be influenced by cultural factors [13]. Tolerance of ambiguity is another key skill. Intercultural interactions often involve uncertainty and unfamiliarity. The ability to remain calm and open-minded in ambiguous situations, rather than becoming frustrated or judgmental, is essential to successful communication. Conflict resolution skills are also crucial in cross-cultural contexts [14]. Different cultures may have different approaches to conflict, and the ability to manage these differences respectfully and effectively is important for maintaining positive relationships. Finally, continuous learning and self-reflection are essential aspects of developing intercultural communication skills. This means actively seeking out opportunities to learn more about different cultures, reflecting on one's own intercultural experiences, and continually striving to improve one's ability to communicate across cultural boundaries. These skills collectively contribute to the development of intercultural competencies, which are increasingly valued in many professional fields. They enable individuals to build stronger relationships, work more effectively in diverse teams and navigate the complexities of our interconnected global society.

---

## 2. Methodology

To address this complex issue, an in-depth study using quantitative methodology was carefully designed and implemented. This approach aimed to gain a holistic and nuanced understanding of the experience of international students in Morocco. The study was carried out with a diverse sample of 26 international students enrolled at AbdelmalekEssaadi University, more specifically at the École Nationale des Sciences Appliquées (ENSA) de Tétouan.

A structured, detailed questionnaire was drawn up and distributed to the participants. This data collection tool was designed to systematically and objectively assess several key aspects:

- **Intercultural communication skills:** The questionnaire included a series of questions designed to measure students' ability to interact effectively in a multicultural context. This included assessments of their ability to

recognize and adapt to cultural differences, as well as their ability to communicate appropriately with people from diverse backgrounds.

- **Level of culture shock:** Standardized scales were used to assess the intensity and nature of culture shock experienced by students. These questions explored aspects such as acculturation stress, feelings of rootlessness, and difficulties in adapting to Moroccan culture.
- **Overall satisfaction with study experience:** This section of the questionnaire was designed to measure students' overall satisfaction with their academic stay in Morocco. Questions covered various aspects of their experience, including the quality of teaching, interactions with local peers, and their general perception of Moroccan university life.
- **Cultural awareness:** Specific items were included to assess students' level of awareness of their own culture and that of Morocco. This included questions about their understanding of Moroccan social norms, values and cultural practices.
- **Intercultural sensitivity:** The questionnaire included items designed to measure students' ability to perceive and appreciate cultural differences in a nuanced and respectful way.
- **Linguistic competence:** Questions were asked to assess the level of proficiency in the relevant languages (Arabic, French, and potentially other local languages), as well as the linguistic progress made by students since their arrival in Morocco.

The questionnaire was designed using a combination of closed-ended questions (e.g. Likert scales) to enable rigorous quantitative analysis, and open-ended questions for nuance and more detailed explanation. The data collected was then subjected to in-depth statistical analysis to identify trends, correlations, and significant factors influencing the experience of international students at ENSA Tétouan.

### 3. Results

The following table provides an overview of the various aspects of the intercultural and linguistic experience of international students. It provides a detailed breakdown of levels of competence and adaptation in various key areas, ranging from intercultural communication skills to language proficiency, including the degree of culture shock and overall satisfaction. This quantitative data will enable us to analyze the students' situation in depth, and identify areas of success as well as potential areas for improvement. Let's take a closer look at these results.

**Table 1** Overview of the various aspects of the intercultural and linguistic experience of international students

	Very low	Low	Average	High	Very high	Means
Intercultural communication skills	0%	11%	31%	58%	0%	3,46
Level of culture shock	27%	0%	46%	27%	0%	2,87
Overall satisfaction with study experience	3,85%	19,23%	46,15%	26,92%	3,85%	3,08
Cultural awareness	0%	15,4%	26,9%	57,7%	0%	3,42
Intercultural sensitivity	0%	11%	35%	54%	0%	3,42
Linguistic competence (Arabic)	35%	0%	46%	19%	0%	2,85
Linguistic competence (Frensh)	0%	0%	23%	0%	77%	3,77

#### 3.1. Intercultural communication skills

The majority of students (58%) scored 4 on the Likert scale, indicating a high level of intercultural competence. These 15 students probably demonstrate a good ability to navigate effectively between different cultures, to understand and respect cultural differences, and to communicate appropriately in a variety of contexts. A group of 8 students (31%) scored 3, corresponding to an average level of intercultural competence. These students could benefit from further support to improve their skills. Finally, 3 students (11%) scored 2, indicating a low level of intercultural competence. These students may require special attention and targeted interventions to improve their intercultural adaptation. No students scored at the extremes of the scale (1 - very low or 5 - very high), suggesting a distribution of skills mainly between low and high levels.

### **3.2. Level of culture shock:**

The majority of students (46%) scored 3 on the Likert scale, indicating a moderate level of culture shock. These 12 students are probably gradually adapting to their new cultural environment, facing challenges but managing them relatively effectively. Two equal groups of 7 students each (27% each) are at the extremes of the scale. The first group scored 4, indicating a high level of culture shock. These students are likely to experience significant difficulties in adapting, and could benefit from additional psychological and practical support to overcome these challenges. The second group of 7 students scored 1, indicating little or no culture shock. These students seem to adapt remarkably well, perhaps due to greater resilience, previous intercultural experience, or cultural proximity to Morocco. No student achieved the maximum score of 5 (very high culture shock), suggesting that, despite the difficulties, no student is in a situation of extreme maladjustment. The overall average of 2.87 on the Likert scale indicates that the general level of culture shock in the group is slightly below moderate. This balanced distribution between the different levels of culture shock reflects the diversity of adaptation experiences within the group of international students, and underlines the importance of an individualized approach in supporting intercultural adaptation.

### **3.3. Overall satisfaction with the study experience**

The average of 3.08 reflects moderate overall satisfaction, slightly above the neutral point. Almost a third of students (8 out of 26, or 26,92%) report a positive experience. The largest proportion of students (12 out of 26, or 46.15%) had a neutral opinion, which contributed significantly to the slightly positive average. Just under a quarter of students (6 out of 26, or 19,23%) are dissatisfied. There are slightly more satisfied students (8) than dissatisfied (6), which explains why the average is slightly positive. The number of very satisfied students is equal to the number of very dissatisfied students (1 each, i.e. 3.85%), showing that extreme opinions are balanced but rare.

### **3.4. Cultural awareness**

The average of 3.42 on a 5-point scale indicates a slightly above-average level of cultural awareness for the class as a whole. More than half the class (57.7%) demonstrates a strong cultural understanding, which is a positive result. Around 15% of students have low cultural awareness and could benefit from more intensive support. The group of students with average awareness (26.9%) represents an opportunity for improvement to move these students towards high awareness. The absence of students at the extremes of the scale suggests that the class is relatively homogeneous, with no cases of very low understanding or exceptional excellence.

### **3.5. Intercultural awareness**

The average of 3.42 on a 5-point scale indicates a slightly above-average level of intercultural sensitivity for the class as a whole. More than half of the class (54%) demonstrated a high level of intercultural sensitivity, which is a positive result. These students are probably the best prepared to adapt and interact effectively in multicultural contexts. The group of students with average sensitivity (35%) represents an opportunity for improvement. With a little extra support, these students could potentially move up to a high sensitivity level. 11% of students have low intercultural sensitivity. This group, although in the minority, could benefit from closer attention and targeted interventions to improve their intercultural understanding and skills. The absence of students at the extremes of the scale suggests that the class is relatively homogeneous, with no cases of very low sensitivity or exceptional excellence in intercultural sensitivity.

### **3.6. Linguistic competence**

#### *3.6.1. Arabic language skills*

Average of 2.85 out of 5, indicating a general level between beginner and intermediate. 19% of students (5) have an advanced level, which can be used as language mentors. 46% (12) have an intermediate level, showing encouraging progress. 35% (9) are still at beginner level, needing more support.

#### *3.6.2. French language skills*

High average of 3.77 out of 5, indicating a general level close to advanced. 77% of students (20) have an advanced level of French. 23% (6) have an intermediate level. No students are at beginner level.

---

## **4. Discussion and limitations**

The results of this study offer valuable insights into the experience of international students at ENSA Tétouan, particularly with regard to their intercultural communication skills and their adaptation to the Moroccan environment.

The majority of students showing a high level of intercultural communication skills is an encouraging result. This suggests that these students are well equipped to navigate the multicultural context of the university and Moroccan society in general. This result is in line with the observations of [10], who emphasize the importance of these skills in intercultural interactions. However, the remaining who have average or low levels, indicate that there is still room for improvement. As Deardorff [7] suggests, universities have a crucial role to play in developing these skills. The balanced distribution of the level of culture shock reflects the diversity of adaptation experiences. This result underlines the importance of an individualized approach to supporting international students, as advocated [11]. Students experiencing high levels of culture shock could benefit from additional psychological and practical support, in line with Kim's [10] recommendations on intercultural adaptation. With an average of 3.08, overall satisfaction is slightly positive, but there is clearly room for improvement. This reflects the challenges of international student mobility identified [1]. The university could draw on Papatsiba [8] work on developing global citizenship to enrich the student experience. The high scores in these two areas (averages of 3.42 for each) are promising. They suggest that students are developing a good understanding of Moroccan culture and are able to interact sensitively in intercultural contexts, in line with Leung [6] model of intercultural competence. However, students with low cultural awareness and intercultural sensitivity deserve special attention [11]. The results show a striking contrast between Arabic and French language skills. This linguistic disparity highlights the importance of language learning in the context of student mobility, as noted by Lynch and Mendelsohn [13]. The university could consider strengthening its Arabic teaching program for international students, perhaps with an emphasis on Moroccan dialect Arabic (Darija) to facilitate everyday interactions. These findings highlight the importance of developing targeted programs to improve intercultural communication skills, mitigate culture shock and strengthen language skills. As Hoat [4] suggests, these skills are essential for the academic success and personal development of international students. The university could consider implementing intercultural communication workshops, peer mentoring programs, and social activities that promote interaction between international and local students, drawing on Ting-Toomey's [14] work on intercultural conflict resolution.

It is important to note some limitations of this study. Firstly, the sample size (26 students) is relatively small, which limits the generalizability of the results. Secondly, the study focuses on a single institution, ENSA Tétouan, and the results may not be representative of the experience of international students at other Moroccan universities. Finally, the study is cross-sectional and does not capture the evolution of students' skills and experiences over time, a dimension that Ghazarian (2014) considers important in the study of international student mobility. Despite these limitations, this study provides valuable information on the experience of international students in Morocco and offers a solid basis for future research and for the development of strategies to improve the experience of international students in Moroccan higher education, thus contributing to the broader understanding of international student mobility in the context of globalization, as described by Hannerz (1999).

---

## 5. Conclusion

This study of intercultural communication skills among international students at ENSA Tetouan in Morocco has highlighted the crucial importance of these skills in the context of international student mobility. The results show that the majority of students possess satisfactory levels of intercultural competence, cultural awareness and overall satisfaction with their study experience. However, the study also revealed areas requiring particular attention, notably with regard to culture shock and improving language skills. These findings underline the need for Moroccan higher education institutions to continue developing programs and initiatives aimed at strengthening the intercultural communication skills of international students. This could include cultural awareness workshops, intercultural mentoring programs, and increased language support, particularly in Arabic. Although this study has certain limitations, particularly in terms of sample size and geographical scope, it nevertheless offers valuable insights to guide future policy and practice in the internationalization of higher education in Morocco. It also paves the way for further research into intercultural dynamics in the context of student mobility in North Africa and the Arab world. In conclusion, the development of intercultural communication skills is proving to be a key element for the success of students' international experience and for the promotion of a truly global and inclusive academic environment in Morocco.

---

## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

## References

- [1] Doménech, A. J., Montalbán, F. M., Llorente, F. M., Zurita, E., Kang, E. K., Botella, L. A., & Chica, P. (2016, October). We-Uri 2.0: Identities and Transcultural Mediations in Korea-Spain Academic Exchanges. In *8th World Congress for Korean Studies* (Vol. 5, No. 7).
- [2] Ghazarian, P. G. (2014). Actual vs. ideal attraction: Trends in the mobility of Korean international students. *Journal of International Students*, 4(1), 89-103.
- [3] Hannerz, U. (1999). Reflections on varieties of culturespeak. *European journal of cultural studies*, 2(3), 393-407.
- [4] Hoat, T. (2016). Developing intercultural competence with web 2.0 technologies in an EFL context.
- [5] Kim, T. (2009). Transnational academic mobility, internationalization and interculturality in higher education. *Intercultural education*, 20(5), 395-405.
- [6] Leung, M. W. (2013). Unraveling the skilled mobility for sustainable development mantra: An analysis of China-EU academic mobility. *Sustainability*, 5(6), 2644-2663.
- [7] Deardorff, D. K. (2006). Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization. *Journal of studies in international education*, 10(3), 241-266.
- [8] Papatsiba, V. (2006). Making higher education more European through student mobility? Revisiting EU initiatives in the context of the Bologna process. *Comparative Education*, 42(1), 93-111.
- [9] KHADIJA EL JARI, H. B. (2023). La communication interculturelle dans les classes de français : spécificités et contraintes. *L'IMPACT*, (2), 19–27. <https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM/limpact-vol1iss2.45179>
- [10] Arasaratnam, L. A., & Doerfel, M. L. (2005). Intercultural communication competence: Identifying key components from multicultural perspectives. *International journal of intercultural relations*, 29(2), 137-163.
- [11] Ting-Toomey, S., & Chung, L. C. (2005). *Understanding intercultural communication* (p. 352). New York: Oxford University Press.
- [12] Ting-Toomey, S., & Dorjee, T. (2018). *Communicating across cultures*. Guilford Publications.
- [13] Lynch, T., & Mendelsohn, D. (2013). Listening. In *An introduction to applied linguistics* (pp. 190-206). Routledge.
- [14] Ting-Toomey, S. (2009). Intercultural conflict competence as a facet of intercultural competence development: Multiple conceptual approaches. *The Sage handbook of intercultural competence*, 100-120.