



A Qualitative Explorative Study of Moroccan EFL Learners' Perceptions of Factors Developing Their Cultural Intelligence (CQ)

Loubna EL Harras¹, Abdelghanie Ennam²

¹A PhD Student, Laboratory of Literature, Arts and Pedagogical Engineering, Faculty OF Language, Letters and Arts, Ibn Tofail, Kenitra, Morocco, ² A Full Professor of Media, Communication, Education, Translation and Postcolonial Studies at the Department of English Studies, Faculty of Language, Letters and Art, Ibn Tofail, Kenitra, Morocco

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* Corresponding author:

Email: loubnaelharras22@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study attempts to investigate the perceptions of Moroccan EFL students of factors that contribute the development of their cultural intelligence (CQ). Through semi structured interviews with 10 Moroccan EFL students, this research tries to explore the key elements that influence their cultural intelligence. Using content analysis, this study revealed that there are four pivotal factors in developing cultural intelligence: media, social engagement, personal experiences and efforts and education including learning English. Thus, this study contributes to the existing literature in that it underscores the significance cultural intelligence in the Moroccan EFL context.

Keywords: EFL learners, factors, culture, cultural intelligence, CQ development, learning

دراسة استكشافية نوعية لتصورات متعلمي الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية بالمغرب حول العوامل المطورة لذكائهم الثقافي

الباحثة لبنى الهراس^١، البرفسور عبد الغني النام^٢

^١ طالب دكتوراه، مختبر الأدب والفنون والهندسة التربوية، كلية اللغات والآداب والفنون، ابن طفيل، القنيطرة، المغرب، ^٢ أستاذ متفرغ للإعلام والاتصال والتعليم والترجمة ودراسات ما بعد الاستعمار في قسم الدراسات الإنجليزية، كلية اللغات والآداب والفنون، ابن طفيل، القنيطرة، المغرب

ملخص

تحاول هذه الدراسة اكتشاف تصورات الطلاب المغاربة المتعلمين للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية العوامل التي تساهم في تنمية وتطوير ذكائهم الثقافي من خلال مقابلات شبه منظمة مع ١٠ طلاب باستخدام تحليل المحتوى، كشفت هذه الدراسة أن هناك أربعة عوامل جوهرية في تطوير الذكاء الثقافي لطلاب اللغة الإنجليزية منها: استهلاك الوسائط الإعلامية، والتفاعل الاجتماعي، والخبرات والجهود الفردية، والتعليم بما في ذلك تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية. و بالتالي تسهم إلى حد ما هذه الدراسة في الأدبيات الموجودة من خلال تسليط الضوء على أهمية الذكاء الثقافي في السياق المغربي لتعلم الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

الكلمات الدالة: متعلمو الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، العوامل المؤثرة، الثقافة، الذكاء الثقافي، تنمية الذكاء الثقافي، التعلم.

Introduction

Due to globalization and digital media, learners of English are sometimes required to interact with other individuals from other cultures with diverse cultural backgrounds. This interaction requires effective communication in which the interlocutors do not merely rely on their linguistic skills but also on cultural awareness, which qualifies them to comprehend as well as adapt to different traditions, customs, beliefs and social norms, to name just a few. While some individuals still face some hindrances in intercultural interactions, others successfully and effortlessly interact and adjust despite those distinct cultural differences. Accordingly, those individuals who thrive in those settings and situations that are diverse from their own demonstrate higher cultural intelligence, which indicates the capability of interacting effectively in distinct cultural contexts (Earley & Ang, 2003; Dyne et al., 2015). Thus, this study uncovers qualitatively the perceptions of Moroccan EFL students' factors that influence the development of their cultural intelligence (CQ).

Literature Review

Cultural Intelligence

Cultural intelligence (CQ) refers to the individual's capability to understand, adjust and act effectively in culturally diverse settings (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008). Earley and Ang (2003) pioneered the concept of cultural intelligence and defined it as the individual's capacity to function in a competent way in unfamiliar cultural settings and environments. Particularly, it includes the capability of recognizing, interpreting, analysing and responding appropriately to the distinct cultural cues in other cultural environment (Earley & Ang, 2012). That is, individuals who have high cultural intelligence (CQ) successfully navigate diverse cultural situations with effectiveness and ease. In the same vein, Guðmundsdóttir (2015) define it as the ability to function in an interactive way in this international area wherein cross interactions take place and increase. Most importantly, the concept has expanded from one's capability to adapt to distinct cultural contexts (Early et al., 2006) to refer to one's competency of having a sort of cultural knowledge and repertoire of behaviors that qualify individuals to operate in other distinct cultures (Thomas and Inkson, 2004). Similarly, Creque and Gooden (2012) pinpoint that cultural intelligence is the possession of cognitive awareness and knowledge that enable influences one's interpretation of cultural contexts positively. With Peterson (2004) the definition expands to mean the individual's ability to adjust their behaviors by using specific skills. Having said that, these encompass language proficiency as well as values such as tolerance and flexibility, all of which enable appropriate and effective interaction within distinct cultural environments.

Cultural intelligence and CQ four factors

Cultural intelligence or CQ is deemed to be a multidimensional construct that consists of four factors, namely cognitive, metacognitive, motivational and behavioural levels (Ang and Dyne, 2008).

The cognitive CQ involves the individual's own understanding of other cultural norms and the environment wherein they are (Gooden et al., 2017). It chiefly focuses on the adequate knowledge to understand diverse cultures, which enables individuals to operate and function effectively in cross cultural settings (Livermore, 2011). Identically, Şenel (2020) defines the cognitive CQ level as one's awareness of other cultural systems as well as it indicates one's capability of identifying the commonalities and differentiating the between the cultural aspects of different cultures. Essentially, an individual with strong cognitive CQ is simply a person who can distinguish between what is universal among cultures and what is unique. That is, it reflects that "declarative knowledge" that entails the familiarity with the practices, norms and practices of other cultural systems in encompassing what is general and common and what is specific (Dahdah, 2017). Like Şenel (2020), who summarizes the cognitive CQ as the ability to identify similarities and differences, Dahdah

(2017) pinpoints the same in that he deems that individuals who have high cognitive CQ are the ones who own a sort of knowledge which enables them differentiate between their own culture and that of the other.

While cognitive CQ is about understanding both cultural similarities and differences, metacognitive CQ refers to the one's own awareness of cultural dynamics in cross cultural situations (Livermore, 2011). This awareness enables individuals to adjust effectively even in cultural settings that are unfamiliar to them by pre planned strategies that lead to appropriate behaviours (Livermore, 2011). Put differently, it involves not merely recognizing those cultural differences in interactions but it exceeds that to applying specific strategies that are context specific, aiming at eventually engaging successfully (Gooden et al., 2017). That is, it reflects the extent to which the individual is consciously evaluate and adjust their approach in cross cultural settings.

The motivational CQ indicates the drive and interest needed to adjust to cross cultural situations, particularly while interacting with individuals whose culture significantly differs from their own (Dahdah, 2017). In other words, it involves both the effort and the energy required to engage in and deal with intercultural settings. It reflects the individual's enthusiasm, determination and self-confidence to operate and perform effectively in culturally diverse settings (Livermore, 2011). Briefly, it measures how the individual is capable and motivated in navigating cultural differences with persistence and confidence.

Behavioural CQ designates the possession of essential verbal and nonverbal capabilities to engage in an effective way with people from diverse cultures (Gooden et al., 2017). This dimension is pivotal as involves adapting one's own behaviours and actions to accommodate cross cultural differences. It reflects the person's ability to act and behave appropriately in different contexts, showing flexibility in communication — both spoken and unspoken and adjusting to varying cultural norms (Livermore, 2011). That is, it measures how well a person can adjust their actions align with distinct cultural situations and contexts.

Cultural intelligence (CQ) and language

Research emphasize the crucial role of language proficiency in boosting cultural competence as it facilitates more communication and intercultural understanding (Alon & Higgins, 2005). Additionally, multilingualism improves cultural knowledge, qualifying individuals to easily and effectively interact in diverse intercultural settings with greater adjustment and adaptability (Shannon & Begley, 2008). In the same vein, many empirical studies demonstrate a strong correlation between language learning and cultural intelligence (Rachmawaty et al., 2018; Karadağ, 2022; Ng et al., 2023).

Beyond language and education, immersive experiences as studying abroad and exchange programs have been demonstrated to significantly boost cultural intelligence (CQ) by exposing students to authentic and real cultural exchanges (Kistyanto et al., 2021; Chang Alexahnder et al., 2002). Likewise, virtual reality immersion is proved to be significant in enriching cultural intelligence (Melinichuk et al., 2025; Presbitero, 2016). Similarly, digital platforms as social media contribute noticeably to cultural intelligence (CQ) development (Hu et al., 2017; Pozas, 2015).

Nevertheless, the cultural content in multiple EFL textbooks remains inadequate (Elghazali, 2022). Still, some innovative tools as documentary videos and films have proved to be effective in addressing this gap (Eyo, 2024; Al-Obaydi & Pikhart, 2023).

Cultural intelligence (CQ) in the Moroccan EFL context

Research on cultural intelligence (CQ) in the Moroccan EFL context still remains limited. However, one notable exception appears in Elghazali's (2022) study, which attempted to investigate both the cultural content and the intercultural adequacy in Moroccan EFL textbooks to foster learners' cultural intelligence. Accordingly, by adopting a CQ framework, this study assesses the effectiveness of the activities that designed to enhance students' cultural intelligence (CQ) as well as it evaluates teachers' perceptions of the

intercultural content by utilizing CQ scale. The findings demonstrate that the metacognitive CQ is the noticeable dimension among Moroccan EFL students. Nonetheless, it highlights that there is a critical gap lies in that those existing activities fail to develop metacognitive as well as other CQ dimensions. Additionally, teachers point out that the behavioural CQ is remarkably underrepresented in the content of the textbook. Having said that, this underscores the need for incorporating more culturally relevant content in Moroccan EFL curricula to address all CQ dimensions, namely the cognitive, metacognitive, motivational and the behavioural—enabling learners to move beyond what is basic, lies here in cultural knowledge or that “what” to deeper intercultural understanding, that can be summarized in the “why” and the “how”.

In line of inquiry, Brancu and Benhida (2020) conduct a sort of comparative study of cultural intelligence (CQ) between Moroccan EFL students and Romanian counterparts. The results of this study reveal that Moroccan EFL learners exhibit higher CQ levels than Romanian ones. Nevertheless, this study emphasizes the significance of intercultural training to promote openness, mitigate stereotypes and boost students’ capability of navigating distinct cultural situations—encompassing all differences in thoughts, social norms and work styles. Nevertheless, no study, to the best of my knowledge, sheds lights on the factors that contribute to the development of Moroccan EFL learners’ cultural intelligence (CQ), which is exclusively the objective of this study.

Method

Research design

This study is carried out using a qualitative research approach for a deep understanding of the main factors that influence the development of Moroccan EFL students’ cultural intelligence (CQ). To meet this research, 10 students were selected for qualitative data collection. The data was collected through interviews with those participants, each lasted for 15 minutes. Before the interviews commenced and after the consent of the participants, they received a short introduction outlining the purpose of this study. In this interview, the inquirer tried to approach the study under investigation by focusing on three pivotal questions:

1. What factors that influence your understanding of other cultures and you feel that they contribute to the development of your cultural intelligence and intercultural competence?
2. Which classroom activities do you perceive as the most effective in enhancing your cultural intelligence?
3. In what ways does English language proficiency shape your perceptions towards other cultures.

Data Analysis and Findings

After the data was recorded through semi structured interviews and meticulously was transcribed, the researcher analysed it by using content analysis. To enhance credibility, another EFL researcher reviewed the discovered themes and codes. Relatedly, it should be noted that the core objective of this study is to investigate students’ perceptions and views on the factors that contribute to the development of their cultural intelligence (CQ). To keep the data confidential, the participants were labelled by numbers from student 1 to student 10.

- What factors that influence your understanding of other cultures and you feel that they contribute to the development of your cultural intelligence and intercultural competence?

The first question explores that factors that help learners understand other cultures and feel that they contribute to the development of their cultural intelligence (CQ). Five themes were emerged on the basis of the first question: media consumption and entertainment, personal experiences as travelling abroad and personal growth, direct and social interaction and formal education through diverse activities. Content analysis identified multiple diverse methods students use to know and learn about other cultures. Below some examples of sources or factors that students use to gain cultural knowledge about other cultures:

"Watching movies and listening to music have really helped me understand the other cultures, I could see how people behave in certain situations, how they celebrate, how they eat, think, talk, etc. I also had the chance to meet some foreigners during an internship so we used to hang out together and learn about their traditions. Besides, visiting some foreign countries like Spain and Italy taught me a bit about their cultures and noticed that we have some things in common" (S 5)

"Social media has helped me a lot in understanding other cultures, and traveling abroad as well. These experiences enhance me to improve my communication skills, and it lets me to grow personally by seeing life from different angles" (S 7)

"Personal experiences, political ideologies, and socioeconomic backgrounds are the main factors that affect one's ability to understand other cultures" (S 9)

"Media (films, videos on Youtube, books), education (classes about history), travel (visiting new countries), and history (learning about how a nation built itself" (S 4)

"Exposure to the Target Culture. I consider myself well-exposed to English-speaking cultures through media and contact with native speakers, which is why I tend to understand English culture more effectively. By 'media,' I meant watching English-language documentaries, films, listening to podcasts, reading books, and interacting online, which helped me increase my cultural literacy. I have also taught American students from various universities during and since completing my MA Program. I also designed and participated in many cultural activities and field trips with them. I had the chance to get to know them both inside and outside the classroom." (S 3)

Watching movies, series, and documentaries in English has exposed me to different cultural norms, humor, and communication styles. For example, American sitcoms showed me how informal conversations and sarcasm work in Western cultures, which contrasts with Moroccan communication, where respect and indirectness are often emphasized. (S 10)

Engaging with scholars in conferences or meeting online with international friends helped me notice cultural differences firsthand. For instance, while discussing topics like family or religion, I learned that some cultures are more private, whereas Moroccans might share openly. This taught me to adapt my communication to avoid misunderstandings. (S 6)

"In English classes, we sometimes studied traditions from Anglophone countries, like Thanksgiving or British politeness norms. Role-playing dialogues (e.g., job interviews in English) highlighted how directness or self-promotion might vary across cultures" (S4)

"I've traveled and participated in events, and I have experienced daily life abroad (e.g., greetings, time management) made me more aware of cultural nuances. Despite the slang of these countries, many people use English as a medium to communicate, and this is another cultural aspect that unifies human communities. These experiences collectively improved my cultural intelligence by teaching me to observe, adapt, and respect differences—key skills for cross-cultural interactions. This experience collectively improved my cultural intelligence by teaching me to observe, adapt, and respect differences—key skills for cross-cultural interactions" (S1).

- Which classroom activities do you perceive as the most effective in enhancing your cultural intelligence?

The second question of the interview tries to explore the cultural activities that students see as the most effective in enhancing their cultural intelligence (CQ). All the respondents affirm that structured educational activities develop their cultural intelligence (CQ). Classroom presentations and discussions,

comparative cultural activities, university courses and virtual exchange programs. Below some examples of the activities that develop students' cultural intelligence (CQ).

"I remember when we tackled the theme of culture in school, we had to prepare presentations about foreign cultures to learn about them and compare them to our Moroccan culture" (S 3)

"We studied cultures and gender studies at university. Also, the virtual exchange meetings, hosted by my university and an American university in Florida, were very important, they helped us to connect with students from America and exchange our idea" (S 8)

"One activity is comparing one cultural practice from another country to our country. For example, we compared Eid Adha with thanksgiving. It was totally effective because we learnt about other cultures and traditions" (S 2).

"Several activities in English classes can effectively help to understand other cultures. These include courses on American and British history as well as intercultural communication. These activities offer immersive experiences, empathy-building, intimate knowledge of cultural quirks are all provided by these activities" (S 4)

"We had a class about British history, the history of the USA, and another one about intercultural communication. The history classes were extremely effective but the latter wasn't because of the professor. He had no idea how to teach that class. Studying British and U.S. history helped me understand how each country's culture developed over time. It revealed the values, struggles, and events that shaped their identities—like the emphasis on freedom in the U.S..." (S 5)

"During my MA studies, I was lucky enough to be taught by an outstanding module called "Multicultural Education". The module incorporated cultural discussions, comparisons, and intercultural communication skills. I learned a few things while studying at an English Language School. The center used Textbooks that incorporate cultural context or diversity, which helped with the understanding of the real-life cultural use of English." (S 9)

"During my studies, I was exposed to authentic cultural material. The following activities were practical because they engaged multiple skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and exposed us to realistic cultural content. That's why they were effective. For instance, videos, articles, essays, and books illustrate real-life situations, traditions (such as Thanksgiving), and ways of thinking characteristic of English-speaking cultures (like individualism). This helped me go beyond the textbook and see how language and culture are connected in real life." (S 6)

"Role-plays (e.g., job interviews, debates) taught me cultural communication styles (direct vs. indirect). Analyzing films/literature (e.g., film review activities) highlighted cultural values like individualism vs. collectivism. Propaganda used against the East..."

Culture-focused projects (e.g., greetings/eating habits / festivals ...) provided factual knowledge but needed deeper reflection. Why effective? Active tasks forced me to experience cultural gaps, not just learn about them. Discomfort in role-plays, for example, taught me to adjust my tone/body language as key to real cross-cultural interactions. It made me feel uncomfortable at first, but it improved my behavioral CQ for cross-cultural settings" (S9)

The third question examines the way in which English language proficiency shapes the students' perceptions towards other cultures. In this vein, most of the respondents claim that studying English increases their curiosity and open mindedness to explore other cultural systems, enhance their communications skills, break down the hindered barriers that prevent them from discovering other cultures and expand the circle of their cultural knowledge. The following quotes tackle all of these:

"Improving my English or learning English in general taught me to become more open-minded and tolerant with other cultures. Also, I feel like I became more curious to learn more about others' lifestyles and customs"
(S 3)

"English being the lingua Franca of the world enabled me to communicate with others from different culture effectively" (S 1)

"Learning English can make people more tolerant of other cultures and help them see the world more widely. People who are fluent in English have access to a wider range of information, including cultural perspectives and experiences, which can foster empathy, understanding, and tolerance. This enhanced understanding helps remove stereotypes and promote intercultural communication" (S10)

"In learning English and according to my experience, being surrounded by native speakers help me a lot to improve my communication and listening skills as well" (S 2)

"Improving one's English helps in understanding other cultures because English is a global language used in media, education, and international communication. A higher level allows access to books, films, news, and conversations from around the world. It also helps in understanding cultural expressions, humor, and social norms that are often lost in translation." (S 5)

"Improving my English has helped me learn to compare cultures and becoming less judgmental. Now I compare cultures instead of saying one is better than the other. Sometimes it's less about right or wrong but about perspectives. I learned to respect other perspectives. Improving my English has also helped me rediscover my own culture and learn about others" (S 6)

*"Impact: Now I feel confident, not anxious, in cross-cultural interactions because English helps me navigate differences. I am developing
Smoother transition between ideas
More precise language ("critically reflective" instead of "judge it being critical")
Clearer explanation of your evolving perspective
Maintained the authentic voice while making it more academically appropriate" (S 7)*

Discussion and conclusion

Overall, it can be deduced that there are some factors that contribute to the development of Moroccan EFL students' cultural intelligence (CQ): 1) Exposure to Media and digital resources, 2) personal experiences and growth, 3) social engagement and interaction, 4) formal education. This aligns with Crowne's (2008) study which highlights that getting familiar to other cultures can be developed through travel as a pure intercultural experience, media consumption, academic education and literature.

Respectively, respondents postulated that exposure to media and digital resources is one chief factor of CQ development. This goes with the perspective of Hu et al. (2018) who confirm that the usage of media especially social media exerts a positive on the cultural intelligence of individuals in the sense that it is thanks to social media, individuals get in cross cultural interactions though virtually, demonstrating then that the usage of media apart of its informational usage, has also a socializing function by enabling individuals interact and socialize. Social media further makes it easier to establish interactions with other individuals. This harmonizes, too, with Majda et al. (2021) who assert that cross cultural interactions through diverse social media platforms foster one's cultural intelligence (CQ).

Moreover, personal experiences and growth is one factor that leads individuals to increase their cultural intelligence (CQ). This goes in accordance with the study of Gökçe and Koç (2024) which

highlights that individual experiences and effort as travelling, reading books and watching films foster students' cultural knowledge and therefore their cultural intelligence (CQ). Also, both engaging and interacting with other people who belong to other cultures, here as native speakers of the target language, increasingly boost learners' cultural intelligence (CQ). This complies with the perspective of Chang Alexander et al. (2022) who affirm that international experiences including engaging with other people internationally enable one to develop his CQ.

Social interaction was also explored to be a key factor in fostering cultural intelligence (CQ). Travelling or dwelling overseas, connecting with international people through applications, virtual classes, video calls and online gaming all help learners to raise their cultural intelligence. This supports the research of Kistyano et al. (2021) who deem that social interactions and global experiences enhance cultural intelligence (CQ). Additionally, as the world has been shrunk to a small village wherein people travel in real and even virtually, social media facilitates social interaction between people from diverse cultures. This conforms the study of Hu et al. (2018) who stress that digital cross-cultural interaction also strengthens cultural intelligence (CQ).

Besides, formal education is also a paramount factor to enhance CQ. Most respondents emphasize that learning English through diverse activities and courses contributes to increasing one's tolerance, open mindedness and cultural understanding. Put differently, English is deemed as a tool to discover other cultures by having access to a wide range of information encompassing one's cultural perspectives and experiences, which can boost empathy, understanding, tolerance and acceptance, suspending judgments, bias and stereotypes.

This matches the study of Crowne (2008) which indicates that, apart from cultural exposure's significance in enhancing CQ, education through extracurricular activities boosts the development of cultural intelligence of students. Identically, all the students reported that learning English has increased their willingness to learn more about other cultures, communicate with people from diverse countries and explore new cultural practices.

This aligns Canbay's study (2010) which linked that education and particularly language learning to cultural intelligence (CQ). Most importantly, in this study, students reported that learning English has helped them to develop their cultural knowledge as by this language they read English books, watch films, communicate and study.

This is supported by Gökçe and Koç's conclusions (2024) that intend that learning English has contributed to students' open mindedness and acceptance of cultural differences and nuances. Finally, as any study, this one has some limitations that lie in depending on merely 10 respondents to the interview, which may limit generalizability.

Thus, further research could recruit a huge sampling by taking into consideration the perspectives of EFL teachers.

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