

*Framing Intercultural Bridges: The Impact of Virtual Exchange on Intercultural Sensitivity as Perceived by Algerian Students at Higher National School of Journalism and Information Sciences.*

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**Abstract:**

*Intercultural sensitivity (IS) is indispensable in devising means for learners to thrive in a globalized world. This investigation aims at exploring students' perceptions regarding the effect of virtual exchange on their IS. The study was descriptive employing a quantitative approach. 91 students at higher national school of Journalism and information sciences were conveniently selected using the IS Scale for data gathering. Results revealed higher levels of IS among students who experienced online intercultural exchange and/or studied abroad compared to students with no intercultural experience. These findings underscore the indispensability of virtual exchanges as an effective educational means for promoting IS and global awareness.*

**Keywords:** *Intercultural competence; intercultural sensitivity; online intercultural exchange.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the last few decades, Foreign Language (FL) education has been affected by the accelerated growth of globalization worldwide (Kramsch, 2014). The globe of today comprises blended peoples and cultures (Blommaert, 2010). Consequently, one of the most pivotal areas of debate in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and learning realm is culture. Foreign language education tends to produce intercultural speakers as a fundamental target (Avgousti, 2018). In accordance with that, language proficiency does not essentially entail that one is adept to communicate effectively across diverse cultural backgrounds. At present, EFL learners are to be equipped with the intercultural dimension of language via which they are permitted to discern their own culture and the ones of others (Schenker, 2013).

Deardoff (2006) has postulated that the rapid development of globalization in the 21st century compels that higher education institutions guarantee that students are developing the required competencies to become interculturally competent and intellectually well equipped to reserve their places in and to conform to the apace changing world. Therefore, advancing intercultural skills is central (Maharaja, 2018).

Brown (2007) has posited that “whenever you teach a language, you also teach a complex system of cultural customs, values and ways of thinking, feeling, and acting” (p. 75). Correspondingly, Deardoff (2006) stresses the capability of communicating efficiently and properly in diverse intercultural situations grounded upon one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes with regard to Byram’s (1997) Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). The latter comprises knowledge, motivation and skills required for effective and appropriate interaction with members of different cultures (Wiseman, 2002 as cited in Aydogan & Akbarov, 2014). One of the best-known models of Intercultural Competence (IC) is Bennett’s (1993) developmental model of intercultural sensitivity which represents the operationalization of the construct in the present study.

In the present digital age, it is becoming arduous to overlook the significance and valuableness of technology in EFL learning. The past two decades have borne testimony to the accelerated advances in the contribution of interactive technologies to learning and teaching in mainstream classrooms (Avgousti, 2018). Moreover, the 21<sup>st</sup> century technological developments carry avenues of potential daily connections around the globe so that learners may become “viable contributors and participants in a linguistically and culturally diverse society” (Moeller & Nugent, 2014 p. 1).

Learners are rendered with valuable opportunities through contact with speakers and representatives of the target culture. Thus, bringing students from distinct cultural backgrounds together through online intercultural exchange can be effective in developing their intercultural communicative skills responding to the demands of today's world with regard to EFL learning (Guth & Helm, 2010).

In accordance with what is postulated above, it is evidenced to put forward that intercultural sensitivity (IS) and Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE) merit closer examination with regard to their significance and pertinence to today's EFL classrooms. In conformity with that, the current investigation is purported to attain the succeeding objectives:

- First, identifying the level of IS perceived by students in an Algerian context.
- Second, providing insights into the enhancement of IS through OIE and bringing contributions to the area of interculturality in EFL learning.

## **2. Literature Review**

Brown (2007) has ascertained that Language and culture are “intricately intertwined” and that learning something of the target culture is an inevitable consequence of successfully learning the target language. The globe is surely pacing towards the constant tendency of interculturalism. Hence, it is inevitably central for individuals to develop ICC (Aydogan & Akbarov, 2014). The term “interculturalism” is coined to delineate the process of encounter and interaction among distinct cultures on the basis of equality and mutual respect. Interculturalism cannot be secured without communication (Bolten, 2007 as cited in Behrnd & Porzelt, 2012). Communication is a prerequisite for interculturalism and all competencies that individuals should develop to engage in effective and appropriate intercultural communications are determined as ICC (Bennett, 1993; Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006).

UNESCO (2006) has encapsulated the aims of intercultural Education under four main pillars as identified by the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century. First, “learning to know” by the combination of general knowledge with the opportunity of working on in-depth projects. Second, “learning to do” by acquiring the competence to handle distinct situations endorsing teamwork. Third, “learning to live together” by developing an understanding and appreciation of other people, learning to manage conflicts, and respecting the values of pluralism, mutual understanding, peace, and cultural diversity. Last, “learning to be” by deploying autonomy to better develop one's personality, judgement, and

personal responsibility. In that regard, education is not to disrespect a person's cultural potential. It has to be grounded upon the right to difference enhancing the sense of identity and personal meaning for the learner.

Chen and Starosta (1996; 2000) have coined the terms intercultural competence, intercultural awareness, and intercultural sensitivity in their understanding of ICC. They (1996) termed the affective process affiliated with ICC as "intercultural sensitivity"; the cognitive process as "intercultural awareness"; and the behavioral process as "intercultural adroitness". Accordingly, they suggest that "intercultural awareness (cognition) is the basic ground of intercultural sensitivity (affect) that ensues in intercultural competence (behavior)". First, the cognitive dimension refers to spotting and understanding cultural conventions that impact how people think and behave and to detecting analogous and dissimilar facets of cultures. Second, the behavioral dimension refers to the ability to behave effectively and appropriately in intercultural interactions encompassing competencies such as observing interaction, analyzing, evaluating, and using language efficiently. Third, the affective dimension refers to an individual's ability to be positive towards understanding and valuing cultural differences in order to endorse proper and potent behavior in intercultural communication. IS comprises characteristics such as respect for other cultures, tolerance, open-mindedness, and having concern for distinct cultures (Chen & Starosta, 1996; Göbel & Helmke, 2010).

Schenker (2012) has asserted that putting stress upon affective, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of IC seems to be promising since it is a judicious endeavour to address the intricacy of intercultural competence. As our interculturally-laced world proceeds to "shrink" and cultures jostle, it is indispensable to become more sensitive to intercultural diversities using English as the medium of interaction (Aydogan & Akbarov, 2014). Peng (2006) has stated that individuals with higher intercultural sensitivity tend to do well in intercultural communication settings (Peng, 2006). Intercultural sensitivity is an inclination that stimulates effective and appropriate behaviour in intercultural interaction process (Chen, 1997). The IS model suggests that the more an individual experiences cultural differences, the better his competence in intercultural situations will be (Greenholtz, 2000). The present probe is delimited to the affective dimension of ICC which is "IS".

Bennett (1993) has purported the "Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity" (DMIS). This model proposes that interculturally sensitive individuals tend to shift from the ethnocentric stage to the ethno-

relative stage. DMIS embraces six developmental stages (Bennett & Bennett, 2004). Bennet (1993) delineates ethnocentrism as “assuming that world view of one’s own culture is central to all reality” (p. 30).

According to Bennett and Bennett (2004), the ethnocentric stage embraces three substages. First, “denial” which refers to denying cultural differences. Second, “defense” which is characterized by guarding own culture. Last, “minimization” which indicates scorning other cultures. During these stages, individuals reckon their own culture as central to reality. As a result, they avoid cultural differences, deny them, defend their culture, and diminish other cultures’ importance. The ethno-relative stage encompasses acceptance, adaptation, and integration substages. Throughout these stages, individuals experience cultural differences and seek accepting other cultures’ value, adapting a standpoint to consider them, or integrating the complete conception into identity definition. Intercultural sensitivity can be reckoned as a tendency to gauge cultural differences while forefend being ethnocentric, having stereotypes and preconceptions (Tuncell & Arıcıoğlu, 2018).

Heinzmann et al. (2015) have asserted that foreign language teaching must endorse the development of ICC. Post to portraying the indispensability of IS in our interculturally growing world, generally; and in EFL learning and teaching sphere particularly; it is inevitable to consider the significance of technology in education. As a corollary, colossal technological advances have been increasingly reached in the last few decades and contributions of interactive technologies cannot be underestimated. With regard to the allure of digital media to youth, online spaces furnish expedient opportunities for interaction and dialogue across differences (Turner, 2006). It has been premised that all learning comprising culture instruction must be pertinent to learners (Kramsch, 2014). This pertinence is manifested in individual learners as “digital natives” spending thousands of hours in the digital realm making it imperative to seize the opportunity and discern this interest in EFL learning (Kramsch, 2013; Paily, 2013).

Technology, if used appropriately; can render unprecedented access and exposure to diverse cultural perspectives. It endorses learners to “prepare for the challenges posed by our increasingly multicultural and global societies” (Garrett-Rucks, 2013, p. 206). Educational efforts to advance ICC and online dialogue have added significance. Intercultural virtual exchange is an emerging field which merits closer scrutiny (Avgousti, 2018; Kreikemeier & James, 2018).

At the outset of 2020, the globe has confronted the unexpected COVID-19 crisis which resulted in severe mobility restrictions all over the globe. The

lockdown has compelled exceptional measures to be taken and testimony is borne to a historic deployment of digital access to services across every realm and to remote learning and teaching. Given this context, it is imminent to address the imperativity of remote learning in today's interculturally globalized world as online intercultural exchanges are entering the mainstream education.

### **3. Methods**

The present investigation is descriptive in nature. It endeavoured to answer the aforementioned research questions addressing the perceptions of Algerian EFL students with regard to their intercultural sensitivity levels. Moreover, it also intended to examine enhancing intercultural sensitivity through intercultural online exchange

#### **3.1 Participants**

Preparatory and Master students, for 2023-2024 academic year, in Higher National School of Journalism and Information Sciences, Algiers, Algeria, were designated as the population of the current investigation. The sample encompassed (n=91) students from the school. Non-probability sampling techniques were deemed appropriate, more precisely convenience sampling. It was convenient in that the participants were merely accessible with no exclusionary pre-requisites to participating. All participants held the Algerian nationality coming from different parts of the country. They fell under one of the following categories: students with no international travel experience, students with international travel experience, and students with online international experience.

#### **3.2 Instruments**

In the current examination, quantitative data were collected via a Likert scale questionnaire. Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) was employed to measure the levels of intercultural sensitivity among the sample members. The ISS was selected due to its validity across cultures which has been proven by numerous distinct studies measuring intercultural sensitivity in diverse contexts. The final ISS version utilized in the present investigation comprised two main parts. The first one was consecrated to participants demographic information and previous intercultural experience while the second part was devoted to measure the levels of IS via a Likert scale as developed by Chen and Starosta (2000). ISS encompassed 24 statements on a 5-point scale (from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). these statements were grouped into five main factors as follows:

- 1. Interaction Engagement (7 items)**
- 2. Respect for Cultural Differences (6 items)**

3. **Interaction Confidence** (5 items)
4. **Interaction Enjoyment** (3 items)
5. **Interaction Attentiveness** (3 items)

Responses to the Likert scale questionnaire questions were coded and analysed through the frequency analysis of descriptive statistics using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

#### 4. Results

Post to data gathering, 91 participants responded to the ISS. Prior to calculating the mean IS score, demographic data were analysed and results are summarized in the subsequent table:

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**Table N<sup>0</sup>(01) :Demographic factors analysis**

<i>Demographic factor</i>	<i>Participants =n</i>	<i>Percentage %</i>	
<i>Gender</i>	<i>n= 91</i>	<i>Female</i>	68.13 %
		<i>Male</i>	31.86 %
<i>Statue</i>	<i>n=91</i>	<i>Student</i>	
<i>Age</i>	<i>n= 91</i>	18-24 years	
<i>Nationality</i>	<i>n= 91</i>	<i>Algerian</i>	

As demonstrated in table 1, females represent (**n female= 68.13%**) of the whole number of participants whereas male’s percentage comprised (**n males= 31. 86%**). Additionally, all participants were students at Higher National School of Journalism and Information Sciences falling under the age category (**18-24**) years old and holding the Algerian nationality. With regard to demographic factors, participants seem to belong to a homogeneous category with no pronounced differences in an endeavour to focalise intercultural experience differences as affiliated with their overall level of IS. In a similar vein, table 2 exhibits descriptive calculations of intercultural experience among the participants:

**Table N<sup>0</sup>(02) :Intercultural experience analysis**

<i>Intercultural experience</i>	<i>Participants =n</i>	<i>Period</i>	<i>Percentage %</i>	
<i>Previous online intercultural exchange</i>	<i>n= 91</i>	<b>4-12</b>	<i>Yes</i>	<b>34 .06 %</b>
		<i>Weeks</i>	<i>No</i>	<b>65.93%</b>
<i>Previous study abroad</i>	<i>n=91</i>	<b>3-9 months</b>	<i>Yes</i>	<b>7.69%</b>
			<i>No</i>	<b>92.30%</b>

The table above demonstrates the percentage of students who had previous online intercultural exchange experience and/or had previously studied abroad. With the regard to the former, **34.06%** of the total number of participants have undergone at least one online intercultural exchange with a period ranging from **(4-12)** week. Furthermore, only **7.69%** of participants reported that they have studied abroad for a period ranging from **(3-9)** months. Accordingly, it is concluded that most of students at Higher National School of Journalism and Information Sciences have never experienced intercultural exchanges either online or abroad.

As elucidated in table 3, the overall mean score of Is levels among participants was calculated with a value of **(M=3.68)** and the standard deviation one is **(SD=.6059)**. Among the 91 respondents, Is score levels ranges from the lowest mean score **(M Min=2.36)** to the highest one **(M Max=4.75)**. The mean calculations were categorised depending on the intercultural experience that participants have undergone. In accordance with that, the highest levels of IS were manifested among participants who were in contact with another culture as they studied abroad with a total mean score of **(M= 4.07)** and a standard deviation of **(SD=.4534)**. Additionally, participants who experienced an online intercultural exchange had a mean score of **(M=3.67)** and a standard deviation of **(SD=.4107)**. Lastly, the lowest IS levels were manifested among participants who neither engaged in online intercultural exchanges nor studied abroad with a mean score of **(M=3.32)** and standard deviation **(SD= .5041)**.

The ISS is fractioned into five main construct sections. Table 4 demonstrates the calculations of the average mean score of each IS construct distinguishably. The average mean score ranges from **(M=2.96, SD=.4247)** to **(M=4.65, SD=.4873)**. The former is the lowest mean representing **“interaction confidence”** among participants with no previous intercultural experience whereas the latter is the highest mean with regard to **“respect for other cultures”** among participants who studied abroad.

**Table N<sup>0</sup>(03) :Overall IS Mean scores**

	<i>Overall Mean Score</i>			
	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
<i>Intercultural online exchange</i>	2.36	4.34	<b>3.67</b>	.4107
<i>Study abroad experience</i>	2.97	4.75	<b>4.07</b>	.4534
<i>No intercultural experience</i>	2.03	3.92	<b>3.32</b>	.5041
<i>Total</i>			<b>3.68</b>	.6059



**Table N<sup>0</sup>(04) :Overall IS Mean scores**

<i>IS Constructs</i>	<i>Intercultural online exchange</i>		<i>Study abroad experience</i>		<i>No intercultural experience</i>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>1. Interaction Engagement</i>	<b>3.54</b>	.5437	<b>3.94</b>	.6541	<b>2.87</b>	.7201
<i>2. Respect for Cultural Differences</i>	<b>3.87</b>	.4509	<b>4.65</b>	.4873	<b>3.65</b>	.5760
<i>3. Interaction Confidence</i>	<b>3.04</b>	.5016	<b>3.34</b>	.5580	<b>2.96</b>	.4247
<i>4. Interaction Enjoyment</i>	<b>4.18</b>	.3450	<b>4.51</b>	.6027	<b>3.79</b>	.5406
<i>5. Interaction Attentiveness</i>	<b>3.73</b>	.4285	<b>3.92</b>	.4752	<b>3.42</b>	.6231

### **5. Discussion**

The aim of the present examination was to scrutinise the perceptions of Higher National School of Journalism and Information Sciences students’ perceptions about the levels of intercultural sensitivity in affiliation with their intercultural experiences. To this end, the related factors were examined comprising intercultural online exchange and study abroad experiences. The participants’ perceptions were explored considering the differences between the subsequent three categories namely: participants with intercultural online exchange experience, participants with study abroad experience, and finally participants with no intercultural experience.

The current findings suggest that the highest levels of IS were manifested among those participants who studied abroad at some point in their lives for the period that ranges from (3-9) months. Though the period was not long as it all was for less than one year, participants in this category demonstrated the highest levels of “respect for other cultures” and “interaction enjoyment” exhibiting a good level of “interaction confidence and engagement”. Along this line, the direct contact with another culture in an immersive fashion might have a positive impact on the levels of individual’s intercultural sensitivity as their cultural awareness towards differences is enhanced via an engaging process of close contact with the source language and culture. This kind of experience is claimed to enhance personal enrichment, and foster awareness, acceptance, and tolerance to diversity and differences (Langley & Breese, 2005).

Along the same line, the participants falling under the second category of experiencing intercultural exchanges via online means were found to undergo higher levels of IS compared to those who have not experienced intercultural exchanges on one hand, and lower levels of IS if compared to the participants who have studied abroad on the other hand. Though the period of online exchanges were considerably shorter than those who studied abroad, it is deemed effective in fostering their levels through online means as getting them involved in indirect contact with the source culture. Online channels of intercultural exchange may increase the opportunities of active engagement interactivity with the target culture rendering undemanding access, and cost and time gains. Ultimately, the participants with no intercultural experiences underwent the lowest levels of IS compared to the abovementioned categories. Nevertheless, their overall IS levels are still not considered to be low but moderate as they are interculturally sensitive in an acceptable manner.

To sum up, the present findings align with previous research on the effectiveness of online intercultural exchange in enhancing intercultural sensitivity among individuals. Prior investigations have systematically elucidated the positive impact of online means on IS. Accordingly, Lee et al. (2020) reviewed empirical studies on the effectiveness of virtual intercultural exchange programs in higher education settings. Results supported the positive effect of these programs on participants' intercultural sensitivity, communication skills, and cultural competence. Moreover, their findings demonstrated a significant enhancement in participants' intercultural competence scores following their engagement in virtual online programs. These findings corroborate the results of the current probe accentuating the evidentiary potency of online cultural exchange in fostering IS and ICC in general.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

The present study was twofold. First, it aimed at determining the levels of intercultural sensitivity among students at Higher national School of Journalism and information sciences as perceived by participants. Second, it intended to scrutinise the impact of online intercultural exchanges on the levels of participants' intercultural sensitivity. The findings revealed a remarkable difference in mean scores on the IS of both participants who studied abroad and experienced virtual intercultural exchange suggesting a positive effect on participants' overall IS.

The current results render a supporting stance to the conclusion that the online cultural exchange programs had a valuable impact on

participants' intercultural sensitivity. These findings contribute to the existing body of literature as they endorse the significant difference in participants' IS scores emphasizing the indispensability and potential of virtual intercultural exchanges as an effective educational means for improving IS and ICC.

These results might be attributed to the immersive nature of the online cultural exchange via direct engagement and interaction with members of the target culture. Besides, virtual exchanges offer unique opportunities for facilitating intercultural learning experiences that exceed geographical and time-based constraints. The accessibility and convenience of online cultural exchange programs make them chiefly appropriate for today's globally interconnected world, where virtual reality has become more and more dominant. Ultimately, educators and practitioners are urged to promote IS and other different components of ICC integrating distinct types of virtual intercultural exchange. Mixed-methods approaches are recommended for further research to approach the subject and to triangulate findings exploring and experimenting the long-term effects of online cultural exchange programs on participants' intercultural competence.

The ISS is fractioned into five main construct sections. Table 4 demonstrates the calculations

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