

**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
MODERN EDUCATION
(IJMOE)**www.gaexcellence.com/ijmoe**MOROCCANS TEACHING ENGLISH IN CHINA:
A JOURNEY OF CROSS-CULTURAL EXPERIENCE**Zakaria El Hilali^{1*}, Mohammed Bekkaoui²¹Mohammed First University zakaria.elhilali@ump.ac.ma <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-0428-2110>²Mohammed First University mohammed.bekkaoui@ump.ac.ma <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-1633-5344>

*Corresponding Author

Article Info:**Article history:**

Received date: 22.04.2026

Revised date: 04.05.2026

Accepted date: 24.05.2026

Published date: 10.06.2026

To cite this document:

El Hilali, Z., & Bekkaoui, M. (2026). Moroccans Teaching English in China: A Journey of Cross-Cultural Experience. *International Journal of Modern Education*, 8(30), 196-213.

Abstract:

This study aims to explore the cross-cultural experiences of Moroccan EFL teachers working in China and examine how those experiences shape their intercultural sensitivity. Globalization has increased the need for English language skills worldwide, and such demand creates unique cross-cultural challenges for EFL teachers seeking opportunities abroad, especially in contexts like China. Based on Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, this paper explores the cross-cultural experiences of 10 Moroccan EFL teachers in China. This study adopts a qualitative approach, and as a data collection method, this study used online semi-structured interviews. Interview responses were analyzed following Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis. The analysis shows that participants faced numerous challenges while adjusting to the Chinese culture, including communication barriers, unfamiliar social norms and food, perceptions by locals as outsiders, and social integration. As they adjusted to these challenges, participants gradually developed intercultural sensitivity. This development, however, was neither linear nor uniform for all participants. In addition to developing intercultural sensitivity, participants also reported developing on both the personal and professional levels. Personally, participants acquired more resilience, independence, and confidence. Professionally, they improved their technological literacy, teaching skills, and work ethic. Findings of this study can fill a critical gap in research on North Africans working in non-Western contexts. Findings can also offer practical implications to improve intercultural training and workplace support for expatriates.

DOI: 10.35631/IJMOE.830014 **Keyword:**

China; DMIS; EFL; Intercultural Sensitivity; Moroccan Teachers



© The authors (2026). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY NC) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. For commercial re-use, please contact ijmoe@gaexcellence.com.

Introduction

Globalization has increased the need for English language skills worldwide (Sawalmeh & Dey, 2023). Such a high demand for English proficiency has led to a growing demand for English, especially in Asia. This has created new opportunities for those teaching English as a Foreign Language (O'Sullivan, 2025). China, in particular, is becoming increasingly open to the world, and as a result, interest in learning English is rising (Mengqi, 2019). The number of English language learners is at least as large as the entire population of native English speakers in the United States (Pruitt, 2018). The growing demand for English has made it relatively easy for most foreigners to find a job as an EFL teacher, especially those who are white (Mengqi, 2019). Teaching English in China is becoming an increasingly popular choice among Moroccans with a bachelor's in English Studies.

There are no studies that have addressed how Moroccans working or living in China navigate and adapt to the Chinese cultural environment. This qualitative study aims to explore how Moroccans teaching English in China experience cultural differences and how their experiences affect their intercultural sensitivity. Findings of this study can fill a critical gap in research on North Africans working in non-Western contexts. Findings can also offer practical implications to improve intercultural training and workplace support for expatriates.

Literature Review

Despite the absence of official data on their numbers, several online sources offer insights into the experiences of Moroccans teaching in China (e.g., Benmalou, 2020). Motivated by the salaries that often triple Moroccan wages (Mengqi, 2019), these young teachers land in China to find themselves in a completely new environment as China and Morocco are two different nations, with different languages, cultures, economies, and political systems.

Politically, China has been ruled under a one-party authoritarian system (the Communist Party of China). Elections are tightly controlled, and power structure is centralized (Le, 2023). Morocco, in contrast, is a constitutional monarchy with a multi-party parliamentary system. The King retains significant executive and religious authority, and parliamentary elections involve pre-approved parties (Drhimeur, 2020). Economically, China is the world's second-largest economy and top global manufacturer. The economic system of China is often described as "socialism with Chinese characteristics" and "socialist market economy" (Le, 2023; Wen & Wolla, 2017). Morocco's economy is smaller and more focused on sectors like agriculture, textiles, and phosphates, although it is gradually expanding into automotive and renewable

energy industries (Amachraa, 2023; Amachraa & Quelin, 2022; Tanchum, 2024). Culturally, China's rich and ancient civilization is rooted in Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism (i.e., the three teachings) (Meulenbeld, 2019). Morocco's culture is predominantly Islamic, and it blends Amazigh, Arab, and French influences. In Morocco, there is a strong emphasis on communal living, hospitality, and traditional family structures (Chtatou, 2019; Fitriyah & Fadhil, 2025; Hagopian 1963).

The two nations are clearly different, which makes adapting to the Chinese cultural context is not an easy endeavor for Moroccans. Different cultures have different “standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, communicating, and acting among those who share a language, a historical period, and a geographical location” (Shavitt *et al.*, 2008, p. 1103). People are naturally competent in their own culture since they develop complex perceptual and communicative abilities that are specific to their own culture through socialization and shared cultural experiences (Bennett, 2017). As people are confronted with cultural differences, their worldviews are challenged, which affects their intercultural sensitivity.

Recent research also highlights the challenges international teachers face while adapting to new cultural and educational contexts. Yi *et al.* (2020), for instance, found that foreign teachers in China commonly experience language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, social isolation, and differences in teaching expectations. However, the study also emphasizes that supportive relationships, intercultural interaction, and flexible coping strategies can facilitate cultural adaptation. Likewise, Aydogan *et al.* (2025) found that intercultural competence plays an important role in the sociocultural adaptation of international faculty members working in multicultural educational environments. The study also stresses the importance of intercultural training in helping expatriate educators adapt more effectively to their host cultures.

Intercultural Sensitivity

Learning to recognize and appreciate cultural differences with the same depth and complexity as one experiences their own culture is what the concept of *intercultural sensitivity* describes. Intercultural sensitivity, more specifically, describes movement from *ethnocentrism* to *ethnorelativism* (Bennett, 2017).

Bennett (2004) defines ethnocentrism as the experience of one's culture as “central to reality.” People with an ethnocentric view of the world experience the beliefs and behaviors they learnt in their primary as “just the way things are” (p. 62). Ethnocentrism leads to two types of distorted biases. The first is *the bias of the insider*: an unquestioned approval of one's own society and practices. The second is *the bias of the outsider*: an unacceptance or intolerance toward other societies (Schopmeyer & Fisher, 1993, p. 148).

Ethnorelativism was coined by Bennett (1986) to describe the opposite of ethnocentrism. People with an ethnorelative perspective recognize and respect cultural differences and understand that no single worldview is inherently superior to others. Individuals with greater intercultural sensitivity have more potential for exercising intercultural competence (Hammer *et al.*, 2003). Culturally sensitive individuals are interested in other cultures, are sensitive enough to observe cultural differences, and are willing to adjust their behavior when moving between different cultural settings (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992).

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

Intercultural sensitivity describes the movement from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism (Bennett, 2017). To explain how this movement occurs, Bennett (1993) developed the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). This model outlines six stages or experiences that people typically move through as they develop intercultural sensitivity. The model assumes that as one's experience of cultural difference becomes more complex and sophisticated, one's potential competence in intercultural relations increases. These six stages spread across the continuum from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. The first three DMIS stages, *Denial*, *Defense*, and *Minimization*, are ethnocentric as they reflect a worldview where one's own culture is central to reality. The final three stages—*Acceptance*, *Adaptation*, and *Integration*—are ethnorelative; they reflect an ability to accept, adapt to, and integrate cultural differences (Hammer *et al.*, 2003).

The DMIS model describes how people navigate the challenges of intercultural interactions as they encounter cultural differences. However, Bennett (2017) stresses that "movement through the stages is not inevitable; it depends on the need to become more competent in communicating outside one's primary social context" (p. 3). That is, movement through DMIS stages is not automatic, but it is driven by a need to communicate across cultures (e.g., job demands, social change). Movement through DMIS stages is also affected by direct or mediated contact with cultural differences (e.g., travel, media, and immigration). Movement through DMIS stages can also be determined by the extent to which ethnocentric views are challenged.

The first and default stage of the DMIS is the *Denial* of cultural differences. In this stage, people disregard the existence or relevance of others from different cultures (Bennett, 2017). The denial stage reflects the state in which one's own culture is viewed as being the only real one while other cultures are either ignored or vaguely recognized. Cultural difference is consequently or perceived in broad, indistinct categories like 'immigrants' or 'foreigners.' (Hammer, 2003, p. 424).

Defense against cultural difference follows *denial*. Defense describes viewing one's culture or even adopted culture as the only acceptable or proper way to live. Individuals at this stage are more aware of cultural differences than those in the Denial stage; however, they are still unable to see culturally different others as equally human. Their perceptions of cultural differences are often based on stereotypes (Bennett, 2017).

Minimization of cultural differences is the third stage of the DMIS, and it refers to the state where people perceive their own cultural values and beliefs as universally shared. As the term implies, *Minimization* is the state in which cultural differences are minimized in favor of perceived similarities between oneself and others. In other words, one's own cultural values are regarded as universal while apparent cultural differences are viewed as "as cosmetic, surface variations" (Greenholtz, 2005, p. 75). However, confrontation with deeper cultural differences may lead people to retreat to the earlier ethnocentric stage of *Defense* (Bennett, 2017).

As individuals move out of the *Minimization* stage, their view of the world begins to be less ethnocentric and more ethnorelative. They begin seeing cultural differences with a complexity equal to those of their own ethnorelative stage (*Acceptance*). In other words, they become

aware of themselves and others “in cultural contexts that are equal in complexity but different in form” (Bennett, 2017, p. 5). *Acceptance* does not necessarily imply agreement; culture difference might be judged negatively, but the judgment is not ethnocentric since it recognizes others as culturally different yet equally human. Thus, *Acceptance* is a state characterized by acknowledging the relativity of values to cultural context—the ability to see the world through different value systems (Hammer, 2003).

Adaptation to cultural differences follows *acceptance*. During the *Adaptation* stage, “one becomes sufficiently comfortable with cultural difference to adopt and shift in and out of alternative viewpoints” (Greenholtz, 2005, p. 75). Bennett (2004) adds that *Adaptation* is not the same as “assimilation,” which implies abandoning one’s identity and adopting the worldview of their host or dominant culture.

The last stage of the DMIS is *Integration*. It describes a state when “one’s experience of self expands to include the worldview of other cultures” (Greenholtz, 2005, p. 75). Bennett (2004) points out that *Integration* is not necessarily better than *Adaptation* in situations demanding intercultural competence. *Integration*, however, describes a situation that a growing number of people experience, such as long-term expatriates and “global nomads.”

The DMIS framework is still applied in recent studies to understand intercultural sensitivity of educators in forging contexts. Etri (2022), for example, used the DMIS to explore intercultural sensitivity development among expatriate English teachers in Saudi Arabia. The findings of this study show that these teachers move between ethnocentric and ethnorelative orientations depending on their intercultural experiences and teaching contexts. Recent research also shows that intercultural competence and adaptation are shaped by continuous interaction with different cultural environments and educational systems (Liu et al., 2024; Lu et al., 2024).

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative approach as the objective is to understand participants’ subjective experiences. A qualitative approach is appropriate for studies that aim to explore how individuals interpret and make sense of their lived experiences in specific social and cultural contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The study specifically employed semi-structured interviews to explore how Moroccan teachers of English experience cultural differences while working in China, and how these experiences affect their intercultural sensitivity.

Sampling and Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure they met the specific criteria relevant to the study (Stratton, 2024). The sample of this study consisted of 10 Moroccan teachers who have taught English in different Chinese cities. Among the ten participants, there were six male and four female participants aged 28–33. As for their work experience in China, it ranged from less than a year to eight years. For reporting purposes, the participants of this study are referred to as P1 through P10.

Data Collection Procedures

Interviews were conducted via audio calls using WeChat, and participants agreed to have the call recorded. Interviews were conducted in English and lasted between 20 minutes to an hour. One participant preferred a more open interview that lasted two hours and 40 minutes. Each interview was audio-recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and assured of their right to withdraw at any time. To protect participants' identities, identifiable information in the responses was removed to maintain the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants.

The interview included open-ended questions in addition to the name, age, and gender of the participants (see Appendix: Interview Protocol). Questions revolved around:

1. Prior experience before going to China
2. Reasons for going to China
3. Experiencing China for the first time
4. Challenges faced while adapting to the cultural differences in China
5. Development of participants' Chinese cultural understanding
6. New perspectives on the Moroccan culture
7. Perceptions of cultural differences after living in China
8. Adapting teaching to the Chinese educational context
9. Personal and Professional Growth in China

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process of thematic analysis: 1) familiarization, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing potential themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the report. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and themes related to participants' intercultural experiences and development. The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) served as the theoretical framework guiding the interpretation of the themes. More specifically, participants' narratives and responses were analyzed in relation to the ethnocentric and ethnorelative stages outlined in the DMIS framework.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To ensure trustworthiness, credibility was supported through careful representation of participants' views and member checking with a small number of respondents. Transferability was facilitated by providing detailed descriptions of participants, the research context, and the data collection process. Dependability was ensured through clear documentation of methodological choices, while confirmability was ensured by minimizing researcher bias and relying on participants' own words. The study followed ethical research guidelines to guarantee the protection and respect of all participants. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study. They were also informed that the answers provided would be kept confidential and used solely for research purposes.

Results

Following thematic analysis, several themes emerged from the participants' narratives. In what follows, the themes identified for each interview question are described along with illustrative quotes from the participants' responses. The themes are *Italicized*, and quotes are presented between "quotation marks".

Prior Experience Before Going to China

Participants were asked about their work experiences in Morocco or other countries before going to China. Most participants had prior work experience in Morocco before working in China. P2, P3, P8, and P10 worked as private school teachers. In addition to working as a teacher, P2 also worked as a salesperson, graphic designer, and self-employed. P5 has experience as a waiter and English tutor. P4 worked as a lifeguard and also did other physical jobs. P1 is the only one with international work experience in Hotel Service and Graphic Design in both Morocco and Qatar. P9 worked as an online community manager. P6 only completed a teaching internship. P7 reported having no work experience before going to China.

Reasons for Going to China

Some participants mentioned more than one reason why they decided to work in China while others reported only one reason. Most participants were motivated by the *better job opportunities and higher salaries* offered in China. Participants also stated that going to China was motivated by a *desire to experience new cultures*. Other participants noted that their choice was influenced by friends who had recommended working in China. In addition to other reasons, P5 mentioned that they saw going to China as an opportunity for personal growth.

Experiencing China for the First Time

Several themes were identified in participants' responses regarding how they felt as they experienced China for the first time. Key themes include 1) *Feeling Observed*, 2) *Having Mixed Feelings*, 3) *Shock and Fascination with Development*, 4) *Feelings of Discomfort*, and 5) *Reduced Shock due to Prior International Experience*.

Some participants report *feeling observed* by the locals from their first moments in China. P4 mentions "people would look at you a lot, stare at you outside ... Some would ask where [I was] from ... I was disgusted by the way older people especially look at me." Participants also recall having *mixed feelings*, including excitement, surprise, and anxiety when they first arrived in China. P4 states: "It was a mix of feelings ... I had the feeling of... wanting to know more and really excited to know [more] about this culture ... I was surprised." P6 similarly notes that he "felt a mix of excitement and anxiety. Everything felt unfamiliar: the language, the food, the way people interact." Another participant also mentioned that upon arriving in China, "a lot of things get mixed together, and you just don't know how to feel."

Some participants also mentioned feeling *shocked and fascinated* as a reaction to the advanced technological, urban, and infrastructural development of China. P3 notes "I was very impressed with how advanced it was and how everything looked. The buildings, the cities and everything ... it was also fascinating... the culture, the architecture, and the efficiency of public

services here.” These reactions are expected given that China is the world's second-largest economy with more advanced infrastructure and technology than Morocco (Le, 2023).

Feelings of discomfort with the foreign land and the unfamiliar norms were also highlighted. P5, for example, notes, “My first week in China was very, very, very terrible. Like a week I will never forget. It was very hard to adapt because this is a foreign land for you.”

Two participants highlighted that prior *international experience reduced their initial shock* with the new cultural environment. P2 states that experiencing China for the first time “was not overwhelming because I've been in another country similar to China.”

Challenges Faced while Adapting to the Cultural Differences in China

The main themes regarding adaptation challenges involve 1) *communication barriers*, 2) *being perceived by locals as a foreigner*, 3) *adapting to the local Chinese food culture*, and 4) *social integration*.

Participants highlighted numerous *communication barriers* they encountered while adapting to the Chinese culture. The major barrier is the limited English proficiency among Chinese people. P6 mentions that “I came with zero skills in Chinese. I only knew the word Nǐ hǎo (你好) [Hello]... it was very difficult for me and there was actually barely no one speaking English.” P5, similarly, comments that the language barrier “made everything feel unfamiliar and stressful.” Another challenge that interviewees mentioned is adapting to the indirect communication style of Chinese people. P5 recalls that they once “unintentionally offended a colleague by giving direct feedback.” P6, likewise, mentions that adapting to social interaction norms was very challenging. For example, “in China, people don't touch each other... They don't even shake hands. They just say, hey, hello. But they're not a very touchy culture.”

Being perceived as a foreigner is another difficulty participants reported encountering while adapting to the Chinese culture. Participants experienced being perceived as outsiders because of their visible differences. P1 states that “People often stared at me... they see a foreigner as a wall... they're not used to seeing foreigners here.”

The participants also struggled with adapting to *the local Chinese food culture*. P5 recounts their experience of the overwhelming food smells and presentation they encountered in China: “[I] get into supermarkets and [I'm hit by] some weird smells... [I] see something totally different from my culture ... it was really hard to get used to the food.” This interviewee also describes the unfamiliar Chinese ingredients and dishes: “They eat like all these kinds of crazy insects ... You might find some restaurants where they eat frogs... I saw some things at first that I thought were really weird.”

Social integration describes the struggle to build relationships with locals. P1 explains that “Making friends... really not easy if you don't know the language... people won't put their trust in you.”

Development of Participants' Chinese Cultural Understanding

Participants reported that their understanding of the Chinese culture improved. Two major themes were identified concerning this aspect of the participants' experience: 1) *Moving Beyond Stereotypes*, and 2) *More Awareness of Social Practices and Values*.

Moving Beyond Stereotypes describes moving from stereotypical and judgmental views of Chinese people and culture to more complex and context-specific understandings. P6 explains:

“When I arrived here ... I saw some things at first that I thought were really weird ... but now I understand it's normal for them ... I don't judge anymore.” P4 expresses that their initial judgmental views about the locals' curiosity about foreigners have changed: “I understood that it's not that the Chinese culture does not welcome foreigners. It's just Chinese people are not used to seeing foreigners.”

More Awareness of Social Practices and Values describes becoming more aware of practices and values (both traditional and modern) that characterize the Chinese society. P2 describes becoming more aware of how Chinese people value individual responsibility and accountability: “each person does what they're supposed to do. Each person respects the law... they don't need to be looking for someone else to do something... they are doing what they're supposed to do.” P4 explains how their time in China helped them better understand the importance of social hierarchy in Chinese society. P5 emphasizes the role of “face” in interpersonal interactions: “They have a culture of losing face ... They always pay attention to how they behave and how they talk to preserve dignity and respect.” The same participant also talks about being more able to understand the coexistence of atheism and Confucian values (e.g., humility, collective responsibility):

“I have also come to appreciate ... some traditional values, like pity, humility and the collective responsibility, [which] were unfamiliar to me before ... Even if it is an atheist country, and they don't believe in religion, but still, they have these traditional values.”

P2 describes being impressed by the active role of older adults in China. The same respondent explains their movement from perceiving the Chinese as workaholics to valuing efficiency and balance:

“I understand that, yes, some of them, have to work all day because that's the level they have reached ... [However], they do understand that you shouldn't be enslaved 24/7 in something that does not require all of that from you.”

P4 explains that their experience in China allowed them to realize that China and Morocco “are not very different, but they are different because they are so far away from each other.”

New Perspectives on the Moroccan Culture

Participants emphasized three key themes regarding how their experience in China has changed their perspective on their home culture: 1) *More Appreciation for Moroccan Culture*, 2) *New perspectives on Moroccan Culture*, and 3) *Critical Reflections on Morocco's Structural and Societal Issues*

More Appreciation for Moroccan Culture expresses how living in China made the participants appreciate their home culture more. For example, P1 explains that being away from Morocco “makes you appreciate a lot of things that you took for granted in your place because you're

away from them now. You appreciate more.” Many participants specifically talk about the social bonds and warmth and the sense of community that characterize Morocco. P2 states:

“I appreciate how we value community... The warmth of collective Moroccan life feels unique ... we’re raised with the strong belief that we have to stick together. Staying with our families is non-negotiable ... Once you leave ... those are the things that you miss.”

P5, likewise, highlights Moroccan hospitality and openness: “living in China has made me ... appreciate the warm hospitality and the openness of Moroccans even more.”

The theme *New perspectives on Moroccan Culture* shows how living in China motivated the participants to reconsider their perspective on their own Culture. P1 explains that their time in China allowed them to realize that Morocco has business opportunities they did not see when they were there:

“I used to think, in Morocco, you cannot do a lot of business, or you need a lot of money to do business, but that is not actually the case. Anybody can do business there ... You just need an idea.”

P4 explains that their experience in China allowed them to see their own culture more neutrally:

“You could be an open-minded person, but still you have only been seeing the same people for 20 years or 25 years. But when you go to a new culture that is completely or partially different from your culture, you actually try to become a more neutral person.”

Critical Reflections on Morocco’s Structural and Societal Issues highlights how working in China has made the participants more aware of Morocco’s internal challenges, particularly in education and development. P6 explains, “I think what we are lacking in Morocco is ... collective responsibility ... I think we should all assume our responsibilities.” Other participants point out the underdevelopment in Morocco compared to China. P9 comments that living in China “makes you see how your country is left behind with years and years of development.”

Perceptions of Cultural Differences After Living in China

Three main themes were identified regarding how the participants’ perceptions of cultural differences have evolved while working in China: 1) *More Acceptance, Tolerance, and Respect toward Cultural Differences*, 2) *Moving Beyond Ethnocentrism*, and 3) *More Awareness and Openness to Cultural Differences*.

More Acceptance, Tolerance, and Respect toward Cultural Differences: Several participants reported that their experience in China encouraged them to approach cultural differences with more *acceptance, tolerance, and respect*. P1, for instance, states that living in China has taught them that “you don’t need to change anything ... You shouldn’t impose what you believe; you accept the way they are and deal with them as they are.” P1 further states that accepting cultural differences does not imply agreement. They explain: “I don’t believe you need to forget your own identity ... You don’t have to agree with everything, but by appreciating their viewpoint, you can communicate and relate to them more effectively.”

Moving Beyond Ethnocentrism involves perceiving difference as a normal part of life and without judgment and regarding all worldviews as equally valid. Participants emphasize that living in China allowed them to view cultural differences as a natural part of life. P5 comments: "I no longer see cultural differences as strange or wrong, but as a natural part of how people are shaped by their environment and history." P6 adds:

"What we know, how we view things in our country is just one window ... It's one truth, but we go to another place, it's another truth. So, we have thousands of truths. No is wrong and no one is right."

P7 explains that being in China encouraged them to be less ethnocentric: "It actually made me understand that our culture isn't the best one at all as we used to think."

More Awareness and Openness to Cultural Differences describes how exposure to the Chinese culture has led the participants to become more *aware* of and more *open* to cultural differences. P3, for instance, explains: "When you live somewhere where they have a different culture, you're just more aware of it and maybe more knowledgeable about these differences." P4 mentions that knowing more "about different cultures ... contributes to [one's] openness and understanding." Similarities among cultures were also highlighted by some participants. P4 states that "we're all the same in many ways."

Adapting Teaching to the Chinese Educational Context

Participants were asked about how their teaching methods and techniques have changed following their experience in the Chinese educational context. Four major themes appear in the responses: 1) *Adopting a Cross-Cultural Approach to Teaching*, 2) *Technology Integration*, 3) *Student Engagement and Fun-Oriented Teaching*, and 3) *Structured, Clear, and Student-Centered Teaching*.

Several participants highlighted adopting a cross-cultural approach to their teaching. P1 highlights culturally contextualizing their teaching: "I try to connect it to their culture. These are some of the things that have changed in the way I think about my classes." P5 similarly underlines showing respect to their students' culture: "I also try to show respect for their culture while gradually introducing new ideas."

Participants also talked about integrating technology and media into their teaching. P2, for instance, stresses that teaching English in China requires incorporating "media... videos, games." P4 also reports using "a lot of technology... PPTs [PowerPoint presentations], songs, games" in their lessons.

Student Engagement and Fun-Oriented Teaching refers to the adoption of a more engaging and fun-oriented approach to teaching. P2 explains that because students study hard and for long hours, "you feel you kind of need to be a performer and entertainer at the same time." P4 similarly notes that Chinese students are a little shy, and "you have to trigger them, and you have to make them excited and involved in class."

The same interviewee mentions that incorporating project-based learning also engages students: "I give them projects to use recyclable materials... students make machines or rockets." P5 also encourages his students "to participate by using games and group activities."

P6 also mentions that “in kindergarten, we focus on movement, toys, and songs... they learn through games.”

Structured, Clear, and Student-Centered Teaching revolves around adopting a teaching style that is structured, clear, and student-centered. P5 notes that their “teaching has become more structured. ... [Chinese students] respond really well to clear instructions. The participant adds that the tonal nature of Chinese makes it hard for Chinese students to pronounce English, which makes repetition and drilling very important.

Personal and Professional Growth in China

In addition to developing intercultural sensitivity, participants also reported that they have personally and professionally developed while working and residing in China.

The key themes that emerged regarding personal development include 1) *Resilience*, 2) *Confidence*, 3) *Patience*, 4) *Independence*, and 5) *Learning the Chinese Language*. P4 reflects on how their experience teaching in China has made them “grow as a person, not just as a teacher.” P1 describes how their experience teaching in China has made them a more *Resilient* individual: “Going out of the country... makes you stronger, mentally stronger individual.” P2 highlights that living in China has also made them more *Independent*: “What you’re getting is that you are living on your own ... you need to do things on your own. You have to kind of go your way.”

P5 talks about how their time in China taught them to be more *Patient*: “living and working in another country for a long time... made me realize that real cultural understanding takes time, patience and ... efforts to understand.” P5 also mentions that they have become more *Confident* and *Independent*: “I’m not scared of speaking English or even Chinese... I have managed to communicate my ideas in a different language ... Living far from home has [also] taught me how to handle challenges on my own.” Some participants talked about being able to *Learn the Chinese Language* despite it being a difficult language to learn.

As for professional development, key themes involve 1) *Technological Literacy* and 2) *Innovative Teaching Skills*, and 3) *A Stronger Work Ethic*. P2 expresses that their time in China made them more comfortable with technology (*Technological Literacy*) because in China, “you need to be a native tech in general, so you need to cover yourself ... I had to develop certain skills, especially the tech side.” P4 talks about how they have improved their *Teaching Skills*:

“I am a more confident teacher after I worked in China. I can deal with different situations. I can talk publicly to parents ... [I am more] able to use different tools and to make his class interesting.” P5, moreover, talks about developing a *Stronger Work Ethic*: “seeing the Chinese work ethic has inspired me... They take work very seriously. In Morocco, sometimes we don’t value work as much.”

Discussion

As they encountered the unfamiliar cultural environment of China, participants reported experiencing mixed feelings, including surprise, excitement, and anxiety as well as feelings of discomfort with the foreign land and the unfamiliar norms. Such natural reactions reflect the stress experienced by people when entering new and unfamiliar cultural environments (Kim, 2017). In addition, Chinese norms and practices were perceived by participants as “unfamiliar”

and “weird”. Such feelings and perceptions reflect the *ethnocentric* stages of DMIS, namely *Denial* and *Defense*. The discomfort and anxiety experienced can be caused by encountering different cultural norms that challenge the participants’ worldview, which considers their culture as the only real one (i.e., *denial* of cultural difference). Experiencing mixed feelings may also reflect a *defensive* reaction to the unfamiliar cultural practices of China.

Denial is also apparent in the reaction of the Chinese locals toward foreigners. Some participants reported feeling observed and stared at by the locals, and such behavior is typical of the *denial* stage. Chinese individuals staring and acting excessively curious stems from limited experience with foreigners since China is characterized by cultural homogeneity (Hui, 2020). Such behavior may be initially perceived as hostile, but it simply reflects a *Denial*-stage perspective, where difference is not recognized. Further, some respondents mentioned that their prior international experience reduced their culture shock. This indicates that these participants had already moved beyond *Denial* and *Defense*, which made their adaptation to the Chinese cultural environment easier than individuals who did not have prior international experiences. Participants highlighted several challenges that they encountered while adapting to the Chinese culture, including communication barriers, unfamiliar social norms, being perceived as foreigners, food differences, social integration, and so on. These communication challenges are unsurprising; participants had only basic Chinese knowledge, and English proficiency in China is relatively low (EF Education First, 2024). In addition, participants reported that the Chinese people tend to be indirect in their communication, which made interactions even more challenging. Indirectness in how the Chinese communicate is the result of what is known in China as “Mianzi,” which is a key cultural concept in Chinese society that could be understood as “saving face” (e.g., reputation, social dignity, prestige, or status in daily interactions) (Zhang, 2023). It is typical for Chinese people not to say “no” or voice disagreement to save each other’s face. However, this behavior might be perceived by people from other cultures as a lack of understanding or knowledge, inflexibility, reluctance to admit to wrong decisions/actions, or unwillingness to confront, challenge, or criticize. Chinese people usually convey the truth non-verbally and read others the same way. Thus, it is important to recognize the subtlety of variation in voice, facial expression, and body language when interacting with Chinese people (Herman, 2012).

The communication barriers and struggles with the Chinese interaction norms often led to stress and a sense of unfamiliarity that align with *Denial*, where individuals struggle to perceive cultural differences beyond their own framework. The unfamiliar was also perceived as a threat or inferiority (e.g., describing local food as “weird” or “crazy”), which is a characteristic of the *defense* stage. In some instances, participants showed a slight movement towards *Minimization*, like assuming universal communication styles. The overall narrative indicated that participants were struggling with major challenges which could be regarded as opportunities for further intercultural sensitivity development.

Participants described how their understanding of the Chinese culture has developed over time. Their statements indicate that more exposure to the Chinese culture facilitated movement toward the ethnocentric stages of the DMIS. Statements such as “we’re all the same in many ways” – (P4) indicate a shift away from oversimplified and ethnocentric views to *Minimization* of cultural differences. Other participants reported a shift from stereotypes and judgment to understanding and accepting cultural norms and values (i.e., *Acceptance* stage). Cultural differences are not only recognized but understood within their context (e.g., understanding that locals’ curiosity is cultural unfamiliarity rather than exclusion). Some participants

demonstrated a shift toward the *Adaptation* stage as they started to appreciate certain Chinese values such as individual responsibility, social hierarchy, and the concept of “face.” Other responses also suggest a move to the *Integration* stage. P5, for example, mentions that “*I’ve learned how to communicate across cultures and manage misunderstandings.*” This statement reflects an internalized multicultural identity, which is typical of *Integration*.

Participants’ narratives also demonstrate more understanding of their own Moroccan culture. For example, respondents expressed more appreciation for the warmth, hospitality, and social bonds that characterize Morocco. Participants also expressed certain critical reflections about Morocco. Although appreciation is a positive form of *Acceptance*, critical reflection is also a part of this stage, as *Acceptance* implies a recognition that their own culture is not inherently perfect or the only way of doing things. This critical view of their own culture also suggests that the participants can step outside their cultural worldview to evaluate it, which is a characteristic of the *Adaptation* stage.

The participants’ narratives show that intercultural sensitivity development is neither automatic nor uniform. It is driven by continuous exposure, reflection, and the need to communicate effectively in a new cultural context (Bennett, 2017). Prior international experience and personal characteristics can also affect the development of international sensitivity.

The study’s findings also reveal concrete professional and personal gains that extend beyond developing one’s intercultural sensitivity. Personally, participants reported developing more resilience, confidence, patience, independence, and learning a new language. Professionally, participants highlighted developing technological literacy and innovative teaching skills, and a stronger work ethic. This suggests that teaching abroad can offer an opportunity for both personal and professional development.

Although most participants reached the *Acceptance* and *Adaptation* stage of the DMIS, few described achieving full *Integration*. This may reflect the relatively short durations of stay for some teachers (6 months to 2 years), as well as ongoing language barriers. However, as highlighted by Bennett (2017), *Integration* is not essential for effective intercultural interactions.

Conclusion

This study examined how Moroccan teachers of English develop intercultural sensitivity while living and working in China. Participants’ experiences reflected progression across different stages of Bennett’s DMIS model, starting from initial discomfort and ethnocentric perceptions to more ethnorelative stages. The participants expressed cultural understanding, acceptance, and in some cases, adaptation. Findings reveal that intercultural sensitivity does not develop automatically but through continuous exposure, reflection, and interaction with cultural differences. The study also highlights how such experiences deepen participants’ appreciation of their own culture. Developing intercultural sensitivity is also linked with personal and professional development. While not all participants reached the stage of full integration, many demonstrated significant movement toward ethnorelativism.

Overall, the findings indicate that teaching in China can serve as a context for both cultural learning as well as personal and professional development. Findings address a critical gap in research on North Africans working in non-Western countries. Findings can also offer practical

tips to improve intercultural training for individuals willing to work in China. Participants reported adaptation challenges as a result of the limited English proficiency among locals and their indirect Chinese communication styles. Thus, training should include basic host-country language survival skills, such as common phrases, greetings, everyday vocabulary, etc. In addition, training needs to raise awareness of the importance of saving face in China as well as the key local norms and everyday practices. For instance, being stared at or approached by strangers in China is normal, and it reflects their curiosity towards foreigners, especially in cities where locals are not used to seeing foreigners.

Acknowledgements: The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to colleagues and peers who provided valuable insights, constructive feedback, and academic support throughout the development of this research, which greatly enhanced the quality of this manuscript.

Funding Statement: No Funding.

Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. Both authors contributed significantly to this work and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission to the International Journal of Modern Education (IJMOE).

Ethics Statement: This study was conducted in accordance with accepted ethical research standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The data collected were used solely for academic purposes.

Author Contribution Statement: The first author was responsible for conceptualization, methodology, data collection, and discussion. The second author was responsible for the literature review and data analysis. Both authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.

References

- Amachraa, A. (2023). Driving The Dream: Morocco's Rise In The Global Automotive Industry. *Policy Center for the New South*.
- Amachraa, A., & Quelin, B. (2022). Morocco emergence in global value chains: Four exemplary industries. *Policy Center for the New South Policy Paper, PP-07*, 22.
- Aydogan, M., İzmir, E., & Shahin, H. (2025). "Like a 6-year-old dropped on Mars without parents": Faculty members' intercultural competence and cultural adaptation in the UAE. *Studies in Higher Education*, 51(4), 855–876. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2025.2495713>
- Benmalou, R. (2020, August 16). *From Meknes to Zhengzhou, Henan: A Moroccan Teacher's Journey in China*. Morocco World News. <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2020/08/67188/from-meknes-to-zhengzhou-henan-a-moroccan-teachers-journey-in-china/>
- Bennett, M. J. (1986). A developmental approach to training for intercultural sensitivity. *International journal of intercultural relations*, 10(2), 179-196.
- Bennett, M. J. (2004). Becoming interculturally competent. *Toward multiculturalism: A reader in multicultural education*, 2(1), 62-77.
- Bennett, M. J., & Hammer, M. (2017). Developmental model of intercultural sensitivity. *The international encyclopedia of intercultural communication*, 1(10).
- Bhawuk, D. P., & Brislin, R. (1992). The measurement of intercultural sensitivity using the concepts of individualism and collectivism. *International journal of intercultural relations*, 16(4), 413-436.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Chtatou, M. (2019, February 4). *Amazigh influence on culture in Morocco – Analysis*. Eurasia Review. <https://www.eurasiareview.com/04022019-amazigh-influence-on-culture-in-morocco-analysis/>
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage publications.
- Drhimeur, L. A. (2020). *Moroccan political system: Literature review*. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3697407>
- EF Education First. (2024). *EF English Proficiency Index 2024: A ranking of 116 countries and regions by English skills*. EF Education First. <https://www.ef.com/epi>
- Etri, W. (2022). *Employing Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) to understand intercultural sensitivity in ELT*. *World Journal of English Language*, 13(1), 39–48. <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v13n1p39>
- Fitriyah, A., & Fadhil, A. D. (2025). Linguistic Hegemony and the Erosion of Local Languages: Analysis of Arab–French Domination to Amazigh Existence in Morocco. *Sinergi International Journal of Communication Sciences*, 3(1), 29-47.
- Greenholtz, J. F. (2005). Does intercultural sensitivity cross cultures? Validity issues in porting instruments across languages and cultures. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 29(1), 73-89.
- Hagopian, E. C. (1963). Islam and society-formation in Morocco past and present. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 3(1), 70-80.
- Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond culture*. Anchor Books.
- Hammer, M. R., Bennett, M. J., & Wiseman, R. (2003). Measuring intercultural sensitivity: The intercultural development inventory. *International journal of intercultural relations*, 27(4), 421-443.

- Herman, L. (2012, February 3). *Understanding saving face could be a saving grace*. China Daily. Retrieved from https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/kindle/2012-02/03/content_14533801.htm
- Hui, V. T. (2020). Cultural Diversity and Coercive Cultural Homogenization in Chinese History. In A. Phillips & C. Reus-Smit (Eds.), *Culture and Order in World Politics* (pp. 93–112). chapter, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kim, Y. Y. (2017). Cross-cultural adaptation. *Oxford research encyclopedia of communication*.
- Le, V. (2023, November 20). *Development and Authoritarianism: China's Political Culture and Economic Reforms*. E-International Relations. <https://www.e-ir.info/2023/11/20/development-and-authoritarianism-chinas-political-culture-and-economic-reforms/>
- Liu, X., Mearns, T., & Admiraal, W. (2024). "For me, it is important to maintain self while adapting": Understanding Chinese foreign language teachers' identity in an intercultural context. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 46(1), 267–285. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2024.2342550>
- Lu, B., Shao, X., Ge, L., & Wu, J. (2024). *Challenges and opportunities in implementing intercultural education in higher education: The perceptions and practice of foreign language teachers in a Chinese university*. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 26(1), 87–103. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2024.2425972>
- Meulenbeld, M. (2019). Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and Chinese Popular Religion. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History*.
- O'Sullivan, I. (2025). *Asia's Growing Demand for English Language Teachers in 2025: A New Era of Opportunity*. TESOL Career Center. <https://careers.tesol.org/article/asia-growing-demand-for-english-language-teachers-in-2025-a-new-era-of-opportunity>
- Pan Mengqi. (2019, August 5). Action taken over illegally hired foreign English teachers. *China Daily*. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201908/05/WS5d4767cba310cf3e35563cf0.html>
- Pruitt, K. (2018, July 13). *Why There is a Rising Global Demand of English Teachers*. www.alliant.edu. <https://www.alliant.edu/blog/there-world-wide-demand-tesol-teachers>
- Sawalmeh, M. H., & Dey, M. (2023). Globalization and the increasing demand for spoken English teachers. *Research Journal in Advanced Humanities*, 4(2), 47-60.
- Schopmeyer, K. D., & Fisher, B. J. (1993). Insiders and outsiders: Exploring ethnocentrism and cultural relativity in sociology courses. *Teaching Sociology*, 148-153.
- Shavitt, S., Lee, A. Y., & Johnson, T. P. (2008). Cross-cultural consumer psychology. In Stratton, S. J. (2024). Purposeful sampling: advantages and pitfalls. *Prehospital and disaster medicine*, 39(2), 121-122.
- Tanchum, M. (2024). *Renewable Energy and Morocco's New Green Industries: How Morocco's Green Energy Ecosystem Can Expand Women and Youth Employment Through Sustainable Development*. Middle East Institute.
- Wen, Y., & Wolla, S. (2017). China's rapid economic rise: A new application of an old recipe. *Social Education*, 81(2), 93-97.
- Yi, S., Wu, N., Xiang, X., & Liu, L. (2020). *Challenges, coping and resources: A thematic analysis of foreign teachers' experience of cultural adaptation in China*. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, Article 168. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00168>
- Zhang, M. (2023). A Review on Mianzi in Interpersonal, Familial, and Business Settings. *Communications in Humanities Research*, 16(1), 54-58.

Appendix: Interview Protocol

- Thank you for participating in this interview. Your involvement is voluntary, and you may skip questions or stop at any time.
- Your responses will remain confidential, and only the researcher can access recordings and transcripts.
- By continuing, you consent to participate and have this interview recorded for research purposes.
- This interview explores your experiences with cultural differences while teaching English in China and how these experiences have influenced your cultural sensitivity.

Personal Information

- Name, age, and gender

General Experience:

1. For how long have been teaching in China?
2. Have you worked in Morocco or other countries before going to China? If yes, what kind of job did you do?
3. Why did you decide to work in China?
4. Could you describe how you felt when you first arrived in China?
5. What challenges have you faced while adapting to the cultural differences in China?

Development of Intercultural Sensitivity:

6. How has your understanding of Chinese culture changed since you started working there?
7. How has your experience in China affected your perspective on your own Moroccan culture?
8. How has working in China changed the way you see cultural differences in general?

Impact on Teaching:

9. How have your teaching methods or techniques changed as a result of your exposure to Chinese culture?
10. How do you deal with differences in student behavior, values, or expectations in your classroom in China?

Reflection and Personal Growth:

11. What did you personally gain from working in China?