



Research Article

Re-imagining Intercultural Education in Higher Education: Recalibrating Practices and Meanings

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Abstract

This paper re-imagines intercultural education in higher education by examining Moroccan university professors' epistemic understandings and pedagogical practices of intercultural language education. It explores how the meanings and practices attached to intercultural education may both challenge and reproduce asymmetrical relations of power among cultures, languages, and knowledge systems. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study investigates university professors' perspectives on the purposes, rationales, and pedagogical enactments of intercultural language education. Data were collected through email interviews with 25 purposefully selected university professors. The findings indicate that participants' understandings and practices largely draw on mainstream conceptualizations of intercultural education, particularly those emphasizing cultural diversity, mutual respect, tolerance, and dialogue in language classrooms. At the same time, participants demonstrate an increasing awareness of the power relations underlying intercultural encounters and of the inequalities that can be reproduced through the privileging of Western cultures, knowledges, and perspectives in non-Western educational contexts. These findings point to a tension between established intercultural pedagogies and emerging critical understandings of culture, knowledge, and power. The paper therefore calls for a recalibration of intercultural education in higher education—one that moves beyond celebratory and essentialist notions of cultural diversity towards more critical, reflexive, and context-responsive practices that interrogate whose cultures, languages, and knowledges are legitimized in the classroom.

Keywords

Intercultural Language Education, Criticality, University Professors, Moroccan Higher Education, Criticality, Western Cultures

1. Introduction

Intercultural Communication and Education (ICE) is believed to be one of the fields that responds to current language classrooms which are characterized by complexities and diversities in terms of cultures, languages and identities [34]. In the Global South, the demand for integrating intercultural knowledge philosophy into university curricula has been

steered by shifting global affairs and the dynamics of international relations. However, the frameworks and methodologies through which ICE is delivered and practiced remain largely contingent on dominant intercultural competency models that have been foregrounded by Euro American scholarly traditions, i.e., [6] model of intercultural communicative compe-

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Received: 20 August 2026; **Accepted:** 27 August 2026; **Published:** 5 September 2026



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tence as well as earlier intercultural indexes on culture associated with [14] and [15-32]. While these models have been useful in accounting for intercultural disparities, they concomitantly continue to perpetuate binary relations by positioning certain cultures and epistemologies as the invisible norm against which other cultures, languages and identities are measured and policed [17].

The paper recognizes that while the field of intercultural communication has increasingly centered cultural diversity and epistemological plurality, the inclusion of non-dominant, non-western intellectual traditions and wisdom may have not yet been taken seriously or allowed to challenge foundational assumptions given the amount of privilege granted to the Anglo-Saxon cosmologies and regimes of truth(s) [10]. Equally, it argues that despite growing critical and decolonial interventions, interculturality often remains depoliticized, using tokenized forms of 'false generosity', thus obscuring how certain structured discourses and practices center particular narratives as sustained models for modernity [24]. Such practices may henceforth render interculturality reproduce the very colonial structures of knowledge, power and being it seeks to avert [1-3]. More troublingly, attempts to engage and centralize the 'Global South' perspectives and lived experiences as loci of enunciation often draw on imported pedagogies and theories as frames of decolonial resistance, interpretation and analysis [12].

Building on these critical insights, the paper argues for re-envisioning the foundational premises of intercultural language education by addressing obscured forms of colonial undertones, cultural categorizations and power relations that are often reproduced through the ways ICE is conceptualized and taught in the South. In fact, non-western classrooms are shaped by specific realities, concerns and complexities which may render applying imported pedagogies and theories incommensurable. Therefore, the paper calls for embracing a more critical and context-sensitive approach to intercultural language education—one that foregrounds the lived experiences of students and educators and that considers them as active agent capable of re-imaging, revamping and localizing intercultural narratives. In doing so, the paper's approach is grounded on decoloniality, which is perceived here as a meta-ontological and epistemic project that nullifies tokenized celebrations of human diversity and looks into how power, inequality, and privilege shape intercultural discourses in higher education contexts [4-9]. In this light, the following questions are raised regarding the study's rationale:

- 1) How intercultural language education is understood in Moroccan higher education?
- 2) Which frameworks are adopted for teaching intercultural education?
- 3) Which intellectual traditions inform university educators' sense-making of intercultural education?

2. Literature Review

Although intercultural education has emerged as a critical field for stymieing historical and contemporary colonial legacies and power dynamics permeating English language teaching (ELT), a growing body of research suggests that it tends to replicate discourses and praxes rooted in European and Anglo-Western modernist traditions [4-31]. In particular, Knowledge production within intercultural language education has been governed by geopolitics that considers Western thought as universal while marginalising or peripheralising other indigenous and place-rooted knowledges [37]. For instance, major theories and approaches of intercultural education have been developed from a Western centric lens, which may lack nuance to the dynamics shaping the classrooms of non-western world [1]. This epistemic hierarchy remains inherently structural, sustained through intellectual workings and pedagogical practices of institutions and educators themselves. Therefore, since what is taught and how it is mediated within intercultural education is political—depending on which cultures, languages, and epistemologies are deemed dominant and legitimate—it is quintessential to recognize these hierarchies within knowledge to ensure that perspectives beyond those of dominant narratives are centered and situated [31].

On a related premise, dominant conceptualisations of intercultural philosophy continue to foreground Western modernist and neoliberal logics that privilege positivist and individualistic inquiries into culture and the intercultural [17]. For example, the canonical Western IC models confine intercultural learning to a set of measurable skills, attitudes and knowledge, thus overlooking how intercultural relations are often established through power relations [11]. On a similar vein, these models seem to be reliant on patronising and depoliticised concepts e.g., tolerance, respect, and diversity, which are often promoted through intuitions like Council of Europe [33]. However, these concepts warrant critical scrutiny: tolerance may, for instance, establish power relations across cultures, whereby certain ways of behaving, thinking and acting of the dominant group are usually set as the norms of what is to be tolerated or banned. Similarly, respect can exacerbate superiority/inferiority dynamics; you can respect the other, but you may genuinely think that your culture or ways of acting and behaving are better than the other. Diversity is also very slippery as it often celebrates human difference in a very apolitical way, overshadowing the unequal relations shaping human encounters.

A further layer of complexity relates to how intercultural realities and problems are epistemically formulated and understood. [26] argue that intercultural issues have often been illustrated through the prism of 'white problems', in which their concerns, conditions and lived experiences are centered and used as frames of reference. In their study, [30] found that Moroccan students' imaginations of intercultural relations are reformulated through factual knowledge associated with US

and UK cultures. Likewise, [2]'s study pointed out the supremacy of Euro-centric narratives in the transfer of knowledge and the possibility of parsing other cultures through the eyes of Modern Europe. This may not only narrow the scope of intercultural inquiry but also reproduce existing layers of colonial narratives in which the relation between the Self and Other may continue to be defined by a spectrum of power asymmetries.

The persistence of coloniality within intercultural language teaching is further precipitated by the tendency of non-western educators and researchers to reproduce the narrative of the West, thus "discounting or overlooking the critical thinking produced by indigenous, Afro, and mestizos whose thinking finds its roots in other logics, concerns, and realities that depart not from modernity alone but also from the long horizon of coloniality" [38]. This epistemic entanglement emanates, unfortunately, from the continued privilege ascribed to Western theories, methodologies and rhetorics within the Global South academic institutions. Consequently, many non-western scholars may find themselves compelled to re-enact dominant Western paradigms in order to attain scholarly legitimacy and visibility. This may untimely reinforce the narrative that interculturality is not for everybody; it speaks from the very outset in favor of an already privileged group [2-32].

Critical interculturalists consider the field of intercultural education a reinforcing instrument of coloniality that functions under the facades of 'diversity and plurality'. It is written in an imperial language of modernity/coloniality that may blur the contextual factors underlying other spaces of the world [22, 23]. That is why, it is imperative to interrogate the latent dynamics perpetuating coloniality through intercultural textbooks, curriculum and teaching practices: Whose knowledge is legitimised, whose histories are narrated, and whose identities are recognised in the classroom? Drawing on decoloniality as a frame of analysis [23-28] allows to move beyond the mere "inclusion" of diverse voices toward dismantling epistemic hierarchies that privilege certain knowledge systems at the expense of local and indigenous epistemologies. This should not only be done in contexts of the Global North, but also the Global South, as critical work in Moroccan higher education has revealed how intercultural programs tend to adopt imported frameworks of "intercultural competence" that often failed to account for local epistemologies and sociopolitical realities, reinforcing the dominance of Western paradigms [29]. As such, the development of students' intercultural competence often remains limited to merely acquainting students with Western frames of thinking, behaving and acting, thereby totally sidelining local intercultural realities and experiences. By critically reflecting on what knowledge is deemed worth teaching and by identifying the traces of coloniality embedded in national and local curricula, educators can actively disrupt these hierarchies and start adopting alternative teaching approaches and materials that foreground the nuanced realities and complexities of today's classrooms [27]. In this sense, unveiling epistemological injustice in intercultural education

mandates collective efforts from the part of policymakers, curriculum designers, and educators to lay the groundwork for a genuine intercultural learning that is bereft of colonial grammar.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Problems and Aims

The study was conducted in Moroccan higher education context, a space that is still under-explored within intercultural education scholarship. Morocco is a postcolonial country that still carries colonial remains and is characterized by multiplicity of cultures, languages and identities. The education system and curriculum are still shaped by the French colonial legacies. Additionally, Moroccan higher education presents an intricate and complex context where diverse cultural and linguistic influences intersect. Henceforth, the pervasive impact of colonialism may continue to shape educational structures and practices in the sense that curriculum may often reflect a Western-centric approach that prioritizes the dominant language and cultural norms over indigenous and local knowledge systems. This necessitates the need for an intercultural education framework that is attuned to the country's specific context by means of navigating and accounting for its cultural and linguistic complexities.

A fundamental premise within the study's logic is that intercultural education in the Global South may continue to foreground Western epistemic assumptions in TESOL education. Such understandings may not only reinforce existing cultural and linguistic hierarchies and inequalities, but may also have a salient percussion on students' imaginations of intercultural encounters. To this end, the study's aims are as follows:

- 1) To ascertain university educators' takes on the underpinnings and objectives of intercultural language teaching in Moroccan higher education.
- 2) To examine whether their teaching praxes are centered around an understanding of intercultural language education that attests to the diversity and equal representation and appreciation of all cultures.
- 3) To problematize the epistemic complexities and dynamics that shape their interpreting, theorizing and operationalizing of interculturality in their contexts.

3.2. Study Design

A qualitative research methodology was adopted for this study through the use of email interviews with the participants to dig deeper into their pedagogies and praxes informing their intercultural teaching. The rationale for choosing qualitative research lies in its affordances in providing much depth and clarity to context-based phenomena, especially when it comes to understanding the participants' experiences and perspectives [7]. Qualitative research is deemed in its entire scope to

provide nuanced understandings of phenomena from the perspectives of the involved participants. It often involves collecting data through interviews, observations, and document analysis, allowing researchers to gather detailed, narrative data that can provide insights into the participants' experiences and viewpoints [38]. This approach contrasts with quantitative research, which typically seeks to quantify variables and identify patterns through statistical analysis.

3.3. Research Participants

25 university professors (12 females, 13 males) including Graduate Teaching Assistant, Assistant, Associate and Full professors from different Moroccan public universities (e.g., Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah University, Mohammed First University, Chouaib Doukali University, Mohammed VI University, and Hassan II University) participated in the email interviews. According to [7], a sample ranging from 10 to 50 participants can be sufficient in qualitative research. To ensure a representative sample of participants, the study used purposive and snowball sampling techniques to recruit university professors from Moroccan public universities who could provide informed insights into the phenomena under scrutiny. The defining characteristics of the participants deemed most relevant to the study encompassed: (a) the participants who are assigned to teach modules related to intercultural education; (b) the participants' teaching experiences, above 3 years of teaching. All participants were teaching assistants as well as tenure-track university professors with PhDs and extensive publications in cross-cultural communication, cultural studies, linguistics, literary studies, or ELT. Participants' teaching experience ranged from 2 to 10 years. All interviewees participated voluntarily upon invitation. Throughout all sections, the acronym P1, P2, etc. is consistently used to stand for university professors.

3.4. Collection of Data

Data were collected through the use of email interviews as elaborated by [8] to provide the participants with ample time frame to reflect on the questions and provide elaborative responses. Interviews were conducted in English as it is the main medium of instruction. Conducting in-depth email interviews sufficed to delve into the participants' insights and perspectives regarding the phenomenon under investigation.

Ethical clearance was ensured after informing the participants about the rationales, procedures and objectives of the research getting their consent to take part in the study. All participants took part in the study voluntarily upon invitation and were informed of the aims and purpose of the interviews in advance. Participants were made aware of all the steps of the research process including how data would be collected and used. Participants were reassured that their identities and discourses would be protected throughout the recruitment, analysis and dissemination stages. Participants were not asked to

disclose their names to ascertain privacy and confidentiality. Random numbers were assigned to identify participants throughout all research stages.

3.5. Data Analysis

To analyse data, a thematic analysis method [5-36] was adopted to organize interview data into key themes. The process of coding interview data and converting them into themes unfolded through three main steps: (1) the participants' narratives were initially re-read to familiarize myself with the content, and afterwards generate initial codes that captured key ideas of the participants, (2) the initial codes were then grouped into broader themes based on their relevance to the research questions. These themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data and (3) the validation of themes was carried out through verification by the researcher.

4. Results

Building on the paper's rationale grounded in current critiques of intercultural education, data are systematically analyzed and presented according to themes derived from the interviews. These themes are discussed in light of the theoretical underpinnings of the study.

4.1. Educators' Epistemic Understandings of Intercultural Education

The first interview question aimed to probe more deeply into university professors' interpretations and sense-making of intercultural education. Some participants tend to interpret intercultural education primarily as a body of knowledge about cultural differences rather than as a transformative pedagogical approach. This suggests that intercultural learning is often framed as the transmission of cultural information rather than the development of critical intercultural awareness and reflexivity. For example, UP5 maintained that:

"Intercultural education can involve helping students learn about other cultures, their traditions, values, and ways of life in order to better understand cultural differences and communicate more effectively with people from diverse backgrounds".

On the other hand, other participants (UP1, UP3, UP15, UP20, UP25) perceive intercultural education as going beyond the mere acquisition of cultural knowledge. From the vantage point of view of these participants, intercultural education is about enhancing students' empathy, openness and the ability to critically reflect on their own taken for granted cultural assumptions while engaging with others. This perspective underscores the importance of developing intercultural attitudes and reflexive skills that enable learners to navigate cultural diversity more thoughtfully. In this sense, UP15 argued that:

“Intercultural education is not only about learning facts about other cultures, but also about helping students question their own assumptions, develop respect for cultural differences, and become more open-minded when interacting with people from diverse cultural backgrounds”.

Furthermore, several participants expressed that intercultural education plays a critical role in shaping students' attitudes toward diversity, challenging them to reflect on their own cultural assumptions and biases. They suggested that this educational approach should actively engage students in dialogues that promote mutual respect and empathy, enabling them to see beyond cultural stereotypes and embrace the complexities of identity in a globalized world. The emphasis on democracy within their conceptualizations of intercultural education highlights the importance of empowering students to participate in democratic processes, recognizing the value of diverse voices and perspectives in fostering a more inclusive society. For instance, UP10 perceived intercultural education as “a transformative process that involves not only learning about other cultures but also engaging in critical self-reflection and recognizing the interconnectedness of global issues”. UP16 highlighted the importance of creating learning environments that are inclusive and responsive to the diverse cultural needs of all students, thus preparing them to become active and responsible global citizens. This perspective underscores the belief that intercultural education should equip students with the critical skills necessary to navigate and contribute positively to an increasingly interconnected world.

Interestingly, some participants (UP 22; UP15; UP23) shed light on the ideological underside of intercultural education, stressing that without a critical examination of the latent power structures, intercultural education risks becoming superficial, reinforcing rather than dismantling the very inequalities it seeks to address. They advocated for a pedagogy that actively challenges these power imbalances, using education as a tool to promote social justice and equity. This requires a commitment to not only acknowledging but also confronting the ways in which certain cultural narratives have been privileged over others and how these narratives impact students' identities and opportunities. Echoing this stance, UP7 argued for the importance of embracing an intercultural teaching approach that disrupts an unequal consideration of cultures in curricula, stating that:

“I believe that intercultural education in Moroccan higher education is an educational approach in which diverse cultural and linguistic models should be considered in curriculum design. This mainly could involve including a set of materials such as texts, audios, pictures and writing tasks that revolve around, fully or partially and explicitly or implicitly, different cultures. It's noteworthy to mention, however, that not all cultures of the world are equally considered in the Moroccan intercultural education. This is also the case for the different cultures found in Morocco, whereas it's more reasonable to personalize intercultural education by including a mixture of the learners' general

culture (nationality, religion, etc.), their more specific cultures (region, city or town, ethnicity, etc.) and the other cultures of the world”.

4.2. Educators' Rationales for Adopting and Implementing Intercultural Education

The second interview question attempted to explore the participants' rationales for adopting and implementing intercultural education in their contexts. Some participants focalized the ontological, cultural and linguistic diversities as foundational elements for embracing intercultural education (UP3, UP4, UP5, UP8, UP23, UP24). They particularly accentuated the importance of acknowledging and valuing these diverse identities within the educational context, seeing them as critical starting points for fostering a more inclusive and respectful learning environment. Reporting on the various intercultural principles, UP24 argued that intercultural education should be embraced “because it harnesses coexistence in one society and the respective perspective of others' cultures and traditions which creates a sense of harmony, love and respect between these different cultural components”. This perspective was echoed by several participants who emphasized that the inclusion of diverse cultural and linguistic identities in education not only enriches the learning experience but also plays a crucial role in promoting social cohesion and reducing cultural tensions. UP 7 commented that:

“I believe that the main reasons behind embracing intercultural education are to encourage openness towards the other who is different from us, to promote peace, tolerance and appreciation of one's own culture and that of the others, to reduce extremism, to equip people with what's necessary to mediate between cultures and live peacefully in different parts of the world, among other reasons”.

Moreover, several educators argued for endorsing intercultural education through the lenses of critical pedagogy that seeks to challenge existing power relations and structured inequalities within their institutions (UP13, UP14, UP16, UP15). They particularly emphasized that intercultural education should go beyond merely celebrating cultural diversity; it must also confront and address the systemic injustices and power imbalances that often marginalize certain cultural groups. This stance was well accentuated by P15 who affirmed that “my overall rationale for embracing intercultural education should not only center around celebrating and acknowledging cultural differences and similarities but also addressing and confronting the range of cultural, racial and linguistic identities that have long marked under-represented contexts”.

Moreover, situating intercultural education within wider critiques of intercultural education that aim to unravel social inequalities and promote social justice, the participants advocated for an intercultural teaching practice that aims to create more inclusive learning environments that challenge dominant cultural narratives and empower marginalized voices. For

these educators, intercultural education is not just about recognizing diversity but also about actively working to dismantle the barriers that prevent equitable participation in society. Foregrounding the diverse ways of knowing, being, and communicating that students bring to the classroom, they advocated for an educational approach that is more equitable and responsive to the needs of all learners, particularly those from marginalized or underrepresented groups. P16 maintained that:

“We should embrace intercultural education for three main reasons: (1) to enunciate the cultural Self in the EFL discourse. By doing so, we can help students to appreciate their own culture and hence avoid any potential identification with or assimilation to foreign cultures, e.g. UK/US, (2) to help students become cross-cultural navigators, and (3) to foster intercultural awareness/learning inside the classroom, especially given the flow of exotic and racist discourses about other cultures”.

This commitment to diversity and inclusivity reflects a broader vision of intercultural education as a tool for social transformation and justice, where all students are empowered to participate fully and equally in the learning process. These sentiments were articulated by P13 and P20 as follows:

“As far as I am concerned, embracing intercultural education in Morocco is, without a shadow of doubt, an essential factor to achieve some sort of equality between the segments of the Moroccan society. In fact, a learner whose identity and cultural background are included in what he learns, is likely to feel attached as well as involved in the teaching-learning process (P13)”.

Moreover, a number of participants confirmed that they exercise intercultural education drawing on different teaching approaches, models and reference books they deemed important for enhancing learners' intercultural exposure. For instance, UP16 elaborated that they often ‘rely on well-known models of intercultural communication frameworks like Byram's intercultural competence model to introduce students to concepts such as cultural awareness, openness, and respect for difference, while also encouraging discussions and reflections on intercultural encounters. This indicates that educators frequently depend on established scholarly models to structure their intercultural teaching practices and support students' engagement with intercultural issues.

Several educators (UP13, UP15, UP16, UP30,5, U P14) emphasized that they rely on reference books on intercultural communication and education to teach cultural differences as these texts provide essential theoretical concepts and examples that foster a deeper understanding of cultural dynamics. For instance, P14 explained:

“I often use *Intercultural Communication: A Critical Introduction* by Ingrid Piller because it encourages students to critically engage with the concept of culture beyond surface-level stereotypes. The book's case studies on global migration and media representations of different cultures are particularly helpful in sparking more discussions on intercultural encounters”.

5. Discussion

Regarding the first interview question, the findings reveal a range of perspectives that reflect the complexity of teaching and understanding interculturality in the Global South, particularly within the Moroccan context. Such understandings are shaped by educators' experiences, perspectives, and broader socio-political realities that underpin their teaching/learning environment. One of the most common ways educators in the study conceptualized intercultural education was through the lens of global citizenship and social cohesion. Educators positioned intercultural education as a tool for fostering students' ability to navigate diverse cultural environments, both locally and globally. This aligns with much of the literature on intercultural competence, which emphasizes the importance of equipping students with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to engage effectively in multicultural settings [25]. By promoting intercultural competence, educators aim to prepare students for a world that is increasingly interconnected, where cross-cultural communication and collaboration are vital for addressing global challenges such as inequality, migration, and environmental sustainability [10].

In the context of global citizenship, intercultural education serves not only as a way to develop students' communication skills across cultures but also as a means of cultivating ethical awareness and a sense of responsibility toward others. Many educators in the study saw intercultural education as key to fostering empathy, tolerance, and respect for diversity, which are crucial for promoting social cohesion in both national and global contexts. In diverse societies like Morocco, where cultural and linguistic plurality is a defining feature, intercultural education offers a framework for addressing social divisions and building more inclusive communities by emphasizing shared values and common humanity. It helps to counteract prejudice, stereotypes, and xenophobia by encouraging students to critically reflect on their own identities and positionalities within a wider global context.

However, while this view of intercultural education as promoting empathy, tolerance, and mutual respect is widely accepted, it also has limitations. Critics have argued that focusing too heavily on these surface-level goals can result in a depoliticized approach to intercultural education, where the deeper issues of power and inequality are overlooked [16, 17]. As such, while some educators in the study were often concerned with preparing students for global dynamics, others were particularly more cautious about addressing the structural inequalities inherent in many intercultural interactions. In this sense, it is important to note that these findings reflect a broader trend in the Global South, where educational institutions are increasingly incorporating global education frameworks. Yet, the challenge remains in ensuring that these frameworks are adapted to local contexts and do not reinforce the dominance of Western models of intercultural language education, which can marginalize non-Western cultural knowledge and perspectives [13].

Within the same premise, it is maintained that intercultural education is not just about understanding other cultures—it's about questioning why certain cultures are privileged and others are marginalized [20]. This critical perspective frames intercultural education as an inherently political endeavor, one that requires an awareness of global power structures and the ways they influence local intercultural dynamics [16]. For some educators in the study, intercultural education must go beyond superficial celebrations of diversity to critically examine how cultural identities are constructed and contested within unequal power relations. These critical conceptualizations are deeply informed by the local context, where educators grapple with Morocco's postcolonial identity and its ongoing negotiations with both Western and regional influences.

Moreover, participants adhering to conventional approaches of intercultural education often emphasized fostering cultural awareness and tolerance, using predefined teaching materials and activities that center cultural differences as a lens through which intercultural education is mapped and parsed. The focus on facilitating students' understanding of different cultural customs, traditions, and norms without critically engaging with underlying power structures or social inequalities may engender unequal perceptions of intercultural relations among learners [16, 17]. It is worth emphasizing here that discourses on 'cultural differences' are politically informed and capable of perpetuating power differences and hierarchies among different groups based on certain cultural categories (superior culture vs inferior culture) [21].

Regarding educators' pedagogical practices of intercultural language education, it is worth mentioning, however, that during the process of enacting ICE, there are certain challenges that may erupt due to given constraints. For instance, it has been found in some studies that while teachers strive to incorporate diverse perspectives and foster critical discussions, the standardized curriculum or institutional policies sometimes limited their flexibility [35]. This highlights the tension between the transformative goals of intercultural education and the realities of working within educational systems that may not fully support or prioritize such approaches [19]. Additionally, the difficulty of navigating sensitive topics such as race, colonialism, and inequality, particularly in contexts where students might feel uncomfortable or resistant to such discussions. This underscores the need for intercultural education to be approached from critical lenses, ensuring that it is a safe space for all students to explore these complex issues.

Such entangled perspectives can perpetuate a narrow and epistemically bounded understanding of the intercultural, one that privileges particular Western-derived conceptualizations of culture, identity, communication, and difference while rendering non-Western ways of knowing, being, and relating less visible or less legitimate [1-22]. In this sense, the problem is not simply that certain cultural perspectives are underrepresented; rather, it concerns the epistemic conditions through which some forms of knowledge are authorized as universal, transferable, and pedagogically desirable, whereas others are

positioned as local, particular, or peripheral. Such hierarchies may also shape how students are read and positioned within intercultural encounters, potentially racializing their identities and subjectivities by associating them with fixed cultural categories, presumed deficiencies, or essentialized notions of difference. Intercultural education, therefore, cannot be understood merely as a pedagogical project of promoting tolerance, cultural awareness, or dialogue. It must also be examined as a site in which knowledge, identity, power, and legitimacy are continuously negotiated [33-35].

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to develop a nuanced mapping of how university professors process, negotiate, interpret, and enact intercultural education within their classrooms. Rather than treating professors as passive recipients of established intercultural education frameworks, the study attends to them as epistemic and pedagogical actors who actively interpret, negotiate, reproduce, and potentially disrupt dominant understandings of the intercultural. The objective is consequently to ascertain how professors make sense of intercultural education within institutional and sociocultural contexts shaped by enduring colonial legacies, linguistic hierarchies, unequal relations of knowledge production, and historically sedimented representations of cultural difference. Particular attention is given to the tensions between the universalizing aspirations of mainstream intercultural education theories and the situated realities within which such theories are translated into pedagogical practice.

Centering decolonial theory within the critical philosophy of intercultural education, the study further seeks to unpack the ideological, epistemological, and ontological assumptions embedded within dominant theories of intercultural education that may remain insufficiently interrogated [22]. More specifically, it examines how these theories inform professors' understandings of what constitutes legitimate intercultural knowledge, whose cultural perspectives are foregrounded, what forms of difference become pedagogically meaningful, and how students are expected to engage with cultural diversity. This perspective allows the study to move beyond a binary opposition between Western and non-Western knowledge and instead interrogate the relations of power through which particular epistemologies acquire authority and become normalized within educational practice. From a decolonial standpoint, the question is therefore not simply whether intercultural education includes diverse cultures, but whether the epistemic architecture of intercultural education itself is capable of accommodating plurality without subordinating difference to pre-established Western conceptual categories.

The study also endeavors to develop a deeper understanding of how university professors are rethinking, reworking, and re-engaging with intercultural education through alternative epistemic and pedagogical lenses. Such re-engagement may involve attempts to draw upon students' lived experiences, local histories, multilingual repertoires, community knowledge, and situated understandings of identity and difference. These

possibilities are particularly significant because intercultural learning cannot be reduced to the acquisition or transformation of abstract cultural knowledge. It also involves questions of positionality, belonging, recognition, voice, agency, and the unequal conditions under which students encounter one another. Accordingly, an intercultural pedagogy attentive to local complexities would need to move beyond simply adding more cultures to an existing curriculum and instead interrogate the assumptions through which culture itself is conceptualized, classified, and pedagogically represented.

In Moroccan context, this interrogation is particularly pertinent. Although higher education policy and pedagogical initiatives increasingly emphasize intercultural awareness, cultural diversity, openness, and dialogue, the epistemological foundations underpinning these orientations have received comparatively limited critical examination [4]. A focus on intercultural competence and awareness can, for instance, unintentionally privilege models of knowledge developed within dominant Western academic traditions while presenting them as universally applicable. Consequently, educational practices intended to foster intercultural understanding may paradoxically reproduce the very asymmetries they seek to challenge, particularly when cultural difference is framed through fixed categories or when Western cultural norms function as implicit benchmarks against which other identities and practices are interpreted [32].

This tension points to a broader issue concerning the politics of knowledge production in Moroccan higher education. The question is not simply whether intercultural education is being implemented, but under what epistemological and political conditions it is being implemented. What forms of knowledge are considered legitimate within intercultural education? How are Western and non-Western knowledges positioned in relation to one another? How do professors negotiate imported theoretical frameworks in relation to local realities? And to what extent do pedagogical practices create possibilities for students to challenge, rather than simply reproduce, established hierarchies of culture, language, identity, and knowledge? Addressing these questions is important because intercultural education operates within broader structures of power that extend beyond the classroom and intersect with histories of colonialism, linguistic domination, globalization, mobility, racialization, and unequal knowledge circulation.

Thus, despite the positive orientation of Moroccan higher education toward fostering intercultural awareness and dialogue, the construction and transmission of intercultural knowledge may inadvertently sustain rather than decenter systems of privilege, marginalization, othering, and power differentials. A critical examination of professors' epistemic perceptions and pedagogical practices is therefore necessary to identify the contradictions embedded within these processes: between inclusion and exclusion, dialogue and hierarchy, cultural recognition and essentialization, and intercultural openness and epistemic dominance. By foregrounding these ten-

sions, the present study contributes to a more critical understanding of intercultural education in Moroccan higher education and opens space for imagining intercultural pedagogies that are not merely more culturally inclusive, but also epistemically plural, contextually responsive, and attentive to the colonial histories and power relations through which knowledge and identities continue to be produced.

In this section, authors are advised to provide a thorough analysis of the results and make comparisons with relevant literature, not a short summary or conclusion. Any future research directions could also be stated in the discussion.

6. Conclusions

The main objective of this study is develop a nuanced mapping of university teachers' epistemic perceptions and practices of intercultural education in Moroccan higher education context. It is based on the premise that intercultural language education (ELE) in non-Western contexts may entail sustaining inequalities between world languages, cultures and identities given that the mainstream discourses and models around intercultural teaching/learning foreground mainly Western frameworks.

The study discussed the status of intercultural education within Moroccan tertiary education, revealing that the main demands that emphasize the importance of promoting cultural diversity and respect within language classrooms. It also stressed the pedagogical practices underscore the need for a more comprehensive approach that not only embraces cultural diversity but also actively challenges the power asymmetries that undermine true intercultural engagement. The study also mapped the trajectory of intercultural education, offering a detailed analysis of how culture has been conceptualized and approached in the teaching of the intercultural. This mapping traced the evolution of intercultural education from traditional frameworks, which often focus on surface-level cultural exchanges and promoting mutual understanding, to more critical and decolonial approaches that challenge entrenched power dynamics.

Taking educators' insights and narratives into account, the thesis situates their rhetorics within the growing body of decolonial research that calls for a re-imagining of intercultural education through the lenses of locally and contextually-situated practices; this also entails contesting colonial power dynamics and fostering greater epistemic plurality [20-30]. In sum, the main themes that emerged from the study—educators' conceptualization of intercultural education, their rationales for embracing it, and their practices of intercultural education—illustrate the diverse and complex ways in which intercultural education is understood and enacted within the Moroccan higher education context.

Abbreviations

ICE Intercultural Communication Education

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the participants for taking part in this study.

Author Contributions

Rania Boustar: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the outcome of this research work has been reported in this manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Biography



Rania Boustar is a Moroccan academic researcher, an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher, and a lecturer at the Higher School of Technology, Multidisciplinary Faculty of Nador. She holds a doctorate from Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University in Fes, where she also earned her

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Research Field

Rania Boustar: Applied Linguistics, Applied Language Studies, Intercultural Communication in Higher Education, Sociolinguistics and Pragmatics, English Language Teaching (ELT)