

## **Do EFL Learners Enhance Their knowledge of Their Home Cultures as a Result of comparing them with other Cultures Through Project-Based Learning?**



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**ABSTRACT:** The existing research studies have revealed that project-based learning (PjBL) has significantly helped foreign language learners enhance their cultural understanding as a result of completing their projects (e.g., Bouchouk, 2017; Hsu, 2014; Kim, 2019; Liu et al., 2006; Ngo, 2014). While these studies have congruently proved the utility of PjBL in enhancing students' cultural awareness, none of them has measured the effect of PjBL together with a comparative and contrastive approach on students' understanding of their home cultures. Hence, the purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of comparing students' home cultures with the English cultures through PjBL on students' understanding of their own cultures in terms of cultural products, cultural practices, and cultural perspectives. Two similar intact groups were randomly assigned to control and treatment groups. The two groups were pretested, administered two different treatments for 24 weeks, and post-tested to assess their differences. The independent sample t-tests results exhibited that the experimental group substantially deepened their understanding of their home cultures as a result of comparing them with the English cultures through PjBL. The study also revealed that while the control group significantly improved their cultural products, those in the experimental group greatly enhanced their knowledge of cultural practices and perspectives.

**KEYWORDS:** Culture Teaching, Cultural Products, Cultural Practices, Cultural Perspectives, Project-Based Learning, Project Work, Seven-Step Process, Home Cultures.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Prompted by the belief that enhancing students' awareness of their own and other cultures serves as a basis for the development of intercultural competence, the Ministry of Education in Morocco, through multiple official documents, recommends incorporating cultures in foreign language instruction. According to the *English Language Guidelines for Secondary Schools (2007)*, by teaching foreign cultures, learners will gain a deeper understanding of their culture(s) and other cultures in terms of their *perspectives* (e.g., values, ideas, attitudes, etc.), *practices* (pattern of social interactions), and *products* (e.g., books, laws, music, etc.). However, the experience tells us that the culture of assessment and the limited time budget have always made it challenging for the EFL practitioners to address culture explicitly alongside language teaching (Akharraz & Tamer, 2021). Project-based learning is one of the student-centered teaching approaches that can help develop language, content, and real-life skills simultaneously.

Irrespective of their limitation in number, the existing studies on project-based learning in the context of culture teaching have consistently come to the conclusion that language learners have improved their cultural awareness following project-work completion. For example, Gu's (2002) 20 Chinese college students and 28 American junior college students "have promoted their critical awareness of cultural differences (...), and they enjoyed learning from their American holidays and their education system" (p. 205). Bulach's (2003) research participants reported having gained some knowledge about culture shock and changed some of their perspectives towards foreigners. Hsu's (2014) research subjects gained more understanding of other cultures. Liu et al.'s (2006) 64 sixth graders from two middle schools in the USA enhanced their understanding of Japanese food and culture. Ngo's (2014) students learned about cultural values and behaviors towards the environmental protections between cultures and knew about these issues in terms of inter-cultures after presenting their reports. Irawati's (2015) participants enhanced their cultural understanding. Bouchouk's (2017) American high school students successfully expanded their cultural knowledge of the host country (Morocco). Finally, Kim's (2019) students "built deep and broad intercultural knowledge based on the four cultural topics" (p.8). Having reviewed the existing studies, the researcher concluded that none of them touched upon the impact of comparing students' home cultures with other cultures through PjBL on students' understanding of their own cultures.

Driven by the deficiency in the research on PjBL in the area of culture teaching and the deficiency in culture teaching practices in the Moroccan EFL context, the researcher's purpose in this study is to empirically investigate the effect of the PjBL approach

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(Stoller's seven-step process) together with the comparative and contrastive approach on students' cultural awareness of their home cultures. By examining the utility of combining PjBL and comparative approach in culture teaching in the Moroccan EFL context, the findings of this study can inform EFL teachers whenever the issue of culture is raised. Finally, since very little has been said and written about PjBL by Moroccan educators, it is hoped that this empirical study can significantly contribute to the field of English teaching in Morocco.

### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1. Benefits of PjBL in the teaching of cultures.

The effectiveness of using the project-based learning approach in teaching cultures in foreign language classrooms has been documented in the literature. The existing quantitative and qualitative studies that combined PjBL and culture teaching in the language education setting have concluded that the research participants enhanced their awareness of the cultures under exploration following project work completion. PjBL has been reported to help college students strengthen their critical cultural awareness. For example, Gu (2002) asked 20 Chinese college students and 28 American junior college students to conduct project work tasks on cultural topics in China or America for 12 weeks. The analysis of classroom observations, interviews, email messages, and other electronic texts demonstrated that Chinese students promoted their critical awareness of cultural differences. Similarly, some of Bulach's (2003) university students in Japan reported having gained some knowledge of culture shock and altered some of their perspectives towards foreigners following their project work completion. Likewise, as a result of investigating the world festivals through project work, Hsu's (2014) research subjects gained more understanding of other cultures. In the same vein, Liu et al.'s (2006) 64 sixth graders from two middle schools in the USA were asked to create the food section of a Japan travel guide in small groups. The analysis of content knowledge questionnaires, survey instruments, and interviews revealed that students broadened their understanding of Japanese food and culture. Although developing cultural understanding was not the core purpose of her study, Irawati (2015)'s 20 students enhanced their cultural knowledge while writing essays on various cultural topics to improve their academic writing. In the same vein, Bouchouk (2017) asked 16 American high school students to explore aspects of Moroccan cultures using project work to develop their cultural knowledge of the host country. Each student was required to accomplish a research study on Moroccan cultural aspects of their interest. Data from interviews concluded that the participants expanded their cultural knowledge of the host country (Morocco). After 16 weeks of learning about American, Korean, and other international cultures through project work using Stoller's (2010) seven-step process, Kim's (2019) pre-service teachers of English completed four projects on four themes (Race and ethnicity, Education, Religion, and Politics). The data elicited from group projects, weekly journals, and post-project written reflections, the findings revealed that students "built deep and broad intercultural knowledge based on the four cultural topics" (p.8).

While the abovementioned studies congruently concluded that their research participants developed their understanding of the cultures being explored thanks to project-based learning, none of them highlighted whether PjBL had improved their home cultures while learning about other cultures via PjBL. Therefore, this study aims at measuring the effect of comparing and contrasting cultures through PjBL on students' understanding of their own cultures.

### 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study addressed one central question.

- Do EFL learners enhance their understanding of their home cultures as a result of comparing them with other cultures through project-based learning?

### 4. METHODOLOGY

This research study measures the effect of utilizing PjBL together in combination with the comparative and contrastive approach on students' awareness of their home cultures. To this end, the researcher employed a quasi-experimental design in which two similar groups were administered a pre-cultural awareness test, exposed to two different treatments, and post-tested to measure the differences between them. Figure 1 illustrates the research design used.

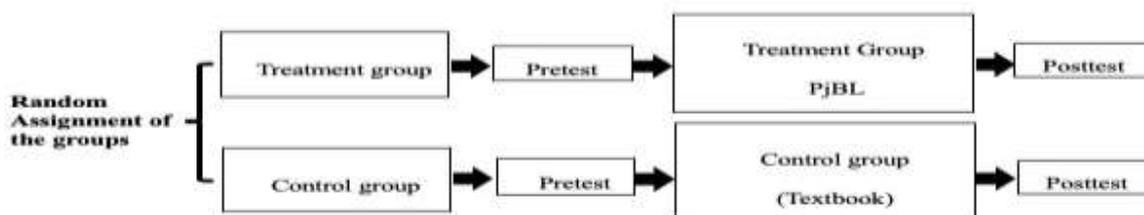


Figure 1. Research Design

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### 5. RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS AND SETTING

Two second-year Baccalaureate students at Annahda high school in Morocco were randomly assigned to the control group (n=34) and treatment group (n=34). All the participants were required to learn English as a school subject. Although the individuals in the two intact groups were not assigned randomly, they were very similar in a number of ways. They had learned general English through the same textbooks. They belonged to the same stream (science). They attend a general English course three times a week.

#### 5.2. Data gathering instruments

##### 5.2.1. Cultural awareness test.

The primary purpose of this study was to empirically measure the effect of using PjBL in conjunction with the comparative and contrastive approach on second-year-Baccalaureate students' awareness of their home cultures in terms of cultural products, cultural practices, and cultural perspectives. In order for the researcher to measure how similar or different the two groups were with respect to their level of cultural awareness prior to the treatment, a cultural awareness test was administered before the study. After six-month treatment, the two groups took the same test to identify whether they experienced progress in terms of cultural awareness level or not. Valette (1977) pointed out that cultural awareness tests are generally administered in pairs: pretests and posttests. While the pretest establishes the baseline, the posttest allows the teacher to determine the degree of progress that students have made.

The cultural awareness test addressed five thematic units chosen from the three ELT textbooks adopted to teach English to the second-year Baccalaureate students in Morocco. The thematic units were (1) *education*, (2) *cultural issues and values*, (3) *women and power*, (4) *humor*, and (5) *science and technology*. In the form of multiple-choice, the researcher developed a total number of 103 items to test the research subjects' knowledge of the English cultures and their own cultures with specific reference to five themes in terms of cultural products, practices, and perspectives. Three distractors were provided for each test item.

**Table 1. Thematic Units, Cultural Objectives, and the Distribution of Test Items Number by Types of Culture and Target cultures.**

Thematic Units	Cultural Objectives	The number of test items by types of culture and target cultures									
		Cultural Products			Cultural practices			Cultural perspectives			
		Morocco	the USA	the UK	Morocco	the USA	the UK	Morocco	the USA	the UK	Total
<i>Education</i>	1-To know about illiteracy in the UK, the USA, and Morocco. 2-To know about the system of education in the USA, the UK, and Morocco.	2	2	2	3	3	3	1	1	1	18
<i>Cultural Issues and values</i>	1-To learn about marriage traditions in the USA, the UK, and Morocco. 2-To learn about a celebration in the USA, the UK, and Morocco.	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	24
<i>Women and Power</i>	1-To know about women in the UK, the USA, and Morocco. 2-To know about the roles of women in the UK, the USA, and Morocco.	3	3	3	3	3	3	1	1	1	21
<i>Humor</i>	1-To learn about humorists in the USA, the UK, and Morocco. 2-To know about the types of humor in the USA, the UK, and Morocco. 3-To know about humor festivals in the USA, the UK, and Morocco.	3	3	3	1	1	1	2	2	2	18
<i>Science and Technology</i>	1-To know about Internet penetration, Internet addiction in the USA, the UK, and Morocco. 2-To know about online shopping culture in the USA, the UK, and Morocco.	1	3	3	4	4	4	1	1	1	22
<b>Total</b>											<b>103</b>

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The self-developed test was validated with regard to item appropriateness, structural accuracy, and relevance to the research purpose. Two experts – Professor Fredricka L. Stoller, Professor Emerita at the English Department in Northern Arizona University, and Professor Mike Byram at Durham University in the UK proofread the test. The two professors proofread the test for language accuracy, content validity, and clarity. For more validity, a similar group to the treatment and control groups in the same research setting took the test to ensure that the test items were understandable, well-defined, and appropriate.

In addition to validity, the researcher made sure that the self-developed test was reliable. Reliability means the consistency of a measurement technique. It is concerned with the consistency or stability of the score obtained from a measure over time and across settings or conditions (Creswell, 2012; Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012; Muijs, 2010; Marczyk, DeMatteo & Festinger, 2005). For the researcher to determine how all items on the test were linked to all other test items, Cronbach's Alpha Reliability approach was employed using the SPSS software version 23. According to Table 2, the reliability coefficient for the pretest yielded  $\alpha = 0.75$ . According to the following guidelines proposed by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007), the reliability of the cultural awareness test was reliable to use in the research study.

**Table 2. Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Results**

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	Number of Items
.755	.754	103

### 5.2.2. Focus group.

A focus group is "a type of group interview in which a moderator leads a discussion with a small group of individuals to examine, in detail, how the group members think or feel about a topic" (Johnson & Christensen, 2014, p. 325). Morgan (1988) added that "focus group interviews produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group" (as cited in Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999, p. 52). The researcher used focus group interviews to complement the cultural-awareness test to examine the benefits that accrued to them while learning about their home cultures through PjBL. The interview consisted of 29 questions aimed to elicit students' opinions about the PjBL benefits with respect to language, cultures, and skills. However, the researcher reported only the data related to students' views about PjBL as a tool to learn about their home cultures.

The focus-group interviews were carried out eight days after students had completed the culture projects. Before the interview started, the researcher ensured that both trust and rapport were established "to make it easy for the interviewee to provide information about his or her inner world" (Johnson & Christensen, 2014, p. 325). To establish this trust and rapport, the researcher used the procedure in conducting a focus group interview suggested by Schensul et al. (1999). The clarity of questions was intensified by paraphrasing and elucidation during the focus group interviews. The use of the Arabic language during the interviews was tolerated so that participants could voice their opinions away from language difficulties.

### 5.2.3. Students' reflective reports.

After completing each of the five projects, group members were asked to evaluate their projects using post-project written reflections. The latter was developed based on Fried-Booth's (2002) suggested review questions, and Stoller's (2010) suggested questions for the project work evaluation. There were eight questions about the cultural content being researched, and the language learned or recycled thanks to the PW tasks. For the purpose of this article, the researcher reported the data linked to cultural content. The researcher believed that students' reflections were so necessary that they helped gain insight into students' content knowledge. In addition, reflections were used as a medium of communication between the researcher and the students. Students were allowed to use the Arabic language so that they could express everything they learned about their home cultures and the English cultures. In addition to the eight questions, students were allowed to write anything else they wished about their projects and the PjBL approach.

## 5.3. Research Procedure

As stated earlier, the two intact groups were introduced to the same cultural content differently. The experimental-group students were taught the English cultures (British, American, and Moroccan cultures) through PjBL, whereas the control-group students were presented into the same cultures through the textbooks. More specifically, the PjBL students were systematically guided to explore the cultural content outside the classroom through a wide variety of authentic materials. In contrast, the control group students' exposure to culture was restricted to reading materials featured in the textbook, teacher's handouts, teacher's comments, and open-class discussions.

Having adopted the seven-step process proposed by Stoller (2010), the researcher constructed five macro-projects in accordance with the cultural goals addressed in the five thematic units (see Table 1). For the researcher to maintain parity of cultural content between the two groups, all the sub-topics searched by the treatment-group students were introduced to the control group students through reading activities. Even though the two groups received different treatments, they spent the same commensurate time learning about the English cultures and their home cultures with regard to five thematic units.

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As soon as the two groups had been administered cultural awareness pretest, the researcher embarked on the experiment. Below is the detailed implementation of the culture lessons through PjBL and the textbook.

### **5.3.1. Treatment group**

#### **Preliminary stage**

During the preliminary stage, the instructor explicitly emphasized the learning benefits of working on cultural projects. First, the researcher provided a brief presentation on the PjBL approach with regard to its learning benefits, the seven-step process, the teacher's and the students' roles, etc. Second, having emphasized the place of culture in EFL learning, the researcher shared samples of students' end-products completed by previous students. Third, the researcher introduced the 3Ps framework to students. Examples from students' home cultures were given to help students capture the meaning of cultural *products*, cultural *practices*, and cultural *perspectives*. Below is the culture teaching procedure through the seven-step process.

#### ***Step 1: The students chose their project themes (week 1)***

The researcher asked the participants to form small groups of five to six members. As soon as the groups were shaped, the researcher introduced the goals of the projects and shared the seven-step process. The researcher broke down each thematic unit into five or six sub-topics (micro-projects) that treated the general themes from different perspectives. For example, the first thematic unit on *education* was broken down into six sub-topics: (1) proms in the USA, the UK, and Morocco, (2) private schools vs. public schools in the USA, the UK, and Morocco, (3) illiteracy in the USA, the UK, and Morocco, (4) dropping out of school in the USA, the UK, and Morocco, (5) school systems in the USA, the UK, and Morocco, (6) higher education in the USA, the UK, and Morocco.

#### ***Step 2: The students determine the outcome of the project (week 1)***

In small groups, students decided on tangible outcomes of their projects based on their interests. The researcher suggested different forms that a tangible outcome can take (e.g., written report, debate, brochure, oral presentation, video, PPT presentation, and theatrical performance). Driven by their language needs, all the groups agreed on posters and PPT presentations. Because the groups worked on different sub-topics, they were required to devise a small quiz at the end of their PPT presentations. The purpose was to urge the audience to value the cultural information shared by paying attention during the oral presentations.

#### ***Step3: Students and instructor structure the project (week 2)***

Group members were asked to meet outside the classroom to structure their projects. The researcher provided them with lists of stimulus questions. The stimulus questions were meant to guide participants during the data gathering process. Three categories of questions were provided: The first category served to elicit cultural products; the second one addressed cultural practices; the third category was meant to elicit cultural perspectives. The driving questions were not linguistically demanding and were meant to help students relate the 3Ps to one another and draw their attention to similarities and differences among the three cultures. During this stage, students decided on their primary roles and responsibilities. The instructor suggested that role assignments ought to take into account students' abilities, interests, and learning facilities. In order to maintain communication outside the classroom, group members created WhatsApp and Facebook groups.

#### ***Step 4: Information gathering cycle (week 3 through week 4)***

As soon as students had assigned roles, they gathered cultural information using the stimulus questions suggested by the instructor. During this stage, the researcher provided a number of language intervention sessions. The sessions stressed the language skills necessary to help students locate cultural information on the Internet easily. Among the language elements highlighted were some phrases and expressions students could use while browsing the web for specific information. Various links to some reliable websites to obtain cultural information about the topics under exploration were provided. Because students were more likely to gather information from reading authentic materials and watching YouTube videos, the instructor provided a language intervention session on note-taking skills, listening/reading for the gist, and listening/reading for details.

#### ***Step 5: Information compilation and analysis Cycle (week 5)***

Students were asked to compile the information and analyze it in accordance with the aims of their project work in mind. While compiling and analyzing the data gathered, the instructor provided another language intervention on data synthesizing techniques. The language interventions taught students how to distinguish relevant information from irrelevant one, pull together information from various sources in a chart, and paraphrase ideas picked out from texts.

#### ***Step 6: Information reporting cycle (week 6)***

The instructor proofread students' tangible outcomes (posters and PPT presentations). After proofreading, feedback on both language and the cultural content were given to each group during school recess time and on Facebook chat boxes. Students reviewed their work keeping in mind the teacher's comments. In order to prepare students for the oral presentations, short intervention sessions were provided on manners of presentation, including voice projection, eye contact, pauses, body language, starting from general to specific, and the use of visual aids. During this stage, students shared their end-products with their classmates. Using checklists, the

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audience was required to assess the quality of the work presented by the groups. Each group had to collect the checklists for future improvement.

### ***Step 7: Evaluating the project (week 6)***

As soon as the research participants presented their end-products, they were asked to evaluate them. To help with this process, the researcher supplied the participants with post-project written reflective reports. These reports included a number of questions to answer outside the classroom. Through those reports, students were encouraged to reflect on the cultural content learned, the language learned, the skills improved, strategies perfected, and the challenges they faced. More specifically, individuals reflected on what they knew that they had not known before the projects, what they could do that they had not been able to do before the projects, what skills they learned, what they could do to improve their projects in the future. Students were allowed to use Arabic to answer questions without being discouraged by the language.

#### ***5.3.2. Control group***

The control-group students were introduced to the English cultures after having taken the pre-cultural awareness tests. During the first session, the researcher highlighted the utility of learning about the English cultures in relation to their own cultures in English. The researcher introduced the meaning of the 3Ps using illustrations and examples from both students' home and the English cultures. Because of the limited amount of cultural content, the researcher supplemented the textbooks with more reading materials from the Internet and other commercial textbooks. Unlike the treatment group, the control-group students were introduced to the culture content through reading texts sometimes in class and usually as homework. Students were assigned reading materials to read outside the classroom and answer comprehension questions. In the post-reading stage, the instructor invited students to open-class discussions. During this stage, the researcher drew students' attention to similarities and differences between students' home cultures and the English cultures with reference to products, practices, and perspectives. As soon as the students had read about a cultural sub-topic, the researcher assigned another reading text on a different sub-theme.

## **5.4. Data Analysis and Statistical Procedures**

### ***5.4.1. Pre- and posttest cultural awareness***

After the researcher had manually scored all the tests, every fourth item was rechecked with the purpose of minimizing errors. Each test item was allotted 1 point. Both correct answers and incorrect answers received 1 point and 0 points, respectively. The control and experimental groups' overall scores on the pre- and posttest were computed by adding up the total number of correct answers. Likewise, in order to identify students' performance on cultural products, cultural practices, and cultural perspectives, students' pre- and posttest scores on the 3Ps were computed by adding up their correct answers. The researcher calculated each group's mean for both pre- and post-test scores by types of culture (3Ps) based on the total scores. To test whether there is a statistically significant difference between the means in the experimental and the control groups on the posttests at a selected probability level  $\alpha \leq .05$ , the researcher used the independent sample *t*-test.

#### ***5.4.1. Focus group.***

The purpose for conducting focus group interviews was to give the research participants a chance to provide spontaneous opinions about PjBL as a learning strategy to learn about cultures. The tips suggested by Anderson and Arsenault (2005) were followed while analyzing the data. The researcher jotted down the most recurrent comments voiced by the participants during the interviews. The comments that reflected only one person's perspective were discarded to create a balanced and accurate reflection of what was referred to in the group. In reporting the data, the researcher mingled "narrative summaries with actual quotes that illustrate views in the participants' words" (Anderson & Arsenault, 2005, p. 221).

#### ***5.4.2. Students' reflective reports.***

Students' post-project written reflections on the five projects were analyzed following the questions in the focus group discussions. By analyzing students' thoughts thematically, the researcher could draw conclusions about students' perceptions of PjBL as a tool for learning about cultures.

## **6. FINDINGS**

A pretest was administered to the control and experimental groups to gauge the research participants' cultural awareness of the American, British, and Moroccan cultures. This section presents the data output on students' cultural awareness by target cultures before and after the treatment. Then, data on students' awareness of their home cultures by types of culture are presented. Table 3 presents the pre-cultural awareness mean scores and standard deviations of students in the two groups before the treatment.

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### 6.1. Pre-cultural awareness results by target cultures

**Table 3. The Mean Scores and Standard Deviations by the Target Cultures**

Target Cultures	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Brit_cult	Contr_group	34	15.32	2.825	.485
	Exper_group	34	16.09	2.712	.465
Amer_cult	Contr_group	34	14.62	2.913	.500
	Exper_group	34	14.26	2.767	.474
Moro_cult	Contr_group	34	17.09	4.907	.842
	Exper_group	34	15.85	3.932	.674

Note. *Brit\_cult* = British cultures. *Amer\_cult* = American cultures. *Moro\_cult* = Moroccan cultures

Table 3 presents the students' cultural awareness mean scores and standard deviations with respect to their home cultures and the English ones. Concerning British cultures, the control-group students' mean score ( $M = 15.32$ ) and that of the experimental-group students ( $M = 16.09$ ) were close. Concerning American cultures, the data reveal that participants from the control and the experimental groups had almost the same mean scores ( $M = 14.62$  vs.  $M = 14.26$ , respectively). Data on Moroccan cultures (students' home cultures) exhibit that the average scores were different ( $M = 17.09$  for the control group and  $M = 15.85$  for the experimental group). The observed standard deviations by target cultures suggest that the distribution of students' scores was close among the two groups. In order to determine whether the observed small differences between the two groups' average scores in terms of the English cultures and students' home cultures were statistically significant, the independent sample *t*-test was used. Table 4 compares the obtained average scores of both groups by target cultures.

**Table 4. Comparison of Pretest Scores on Cultural Awareness by Target Cultures.**

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances and <i>t</i> -test for Equality of Means						
		<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i> (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Brit_cul	Equal variances assumed	.018	.895	-1.139	66	.259	-.765	.672
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.139	65.890	.259	-.765	.672
Amer_cul	Equal variances assumed	.043	.836	.512	66	.610	.353	.689
	Equal variances not assumed			.512	65.826	.610	.353	.689
Mor_cul	Equal variances assumed	.885	.350	1.145	66	.256	1.235	1.078
	Equal variances not assumed			1.145	63.006	.256	1.235	1.078

Note. *Brit\_cul* = British cultures. *Amer\_cul* = American cultures. *Mor\_cul* = Moroccan cultures

Table 4 demonstrates that the mean differences between the experimental and control groups were small and, therefore, a statistically significant difference did not exist among the scores. More specifically, the inferential statistics of students' knowledge of British cultures were: ( $t(66) = -1.139, p > .05$ ), American cultures ( $t(66) = .512, p > .05$ ), and Moroccan cultures ( $t(66) = 1.145, p > .05$ ). These data patterns suggest that students from the control and the experimental groups had similar cultural knowledge of their own and the English cultures before the treatment.

### 6.2. post-cultural awareness by target cultures

**Table 5. Descriptive Statistics of Cultural Awareness by the Target Culture**

	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
British cultures	Contr_group	34	17.97	2.623	.450
	Exper_group	34	22.18	2.611	.448
American cultures	Contr_group	34	18.38	3.701	.635
	Exper_group	34	23.59	4.236	.727
Moroccan cultures	Contr_group	34	22.00	3.499	.600
	Exper_group	34	29.29	4.034	.692

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The posttest data patterns on students' cultural awareness by target cultures reveal that the experimental-group students' average scores on British cultures, American cultures, and Moroccan cultures ( $M = 22.18$ ,  $M = 23.59$ ,  $M = 29.29$  respectively) were higher than those for the control group ( $M = 17.97$ ,  $M = 18.38$ ,  $M = 22$  respectively). Also, while the observed standard deviations for the two groups were very similar regarding British cultures, those of American and Moroccan cultures were closer. This difference indicates that the American culture scores for students in the experimental group were slightly wider than those in the control group. In contrast, the distribution of the Moroccan culture scores in the control group was a little wider than those in the experimental group. By and large, the observed close standard deviations indicate that students' scores on the cultural awareness by target cultures clustered around the observed mean scores. Therefore, there was no much variability among the students in both groups. For the researcher to decide whether a statistically significant difference existed between the two groups' average performance on cultural awareness by target cultures, the observed mean scores were compared using an independent sample  $t$ -test. Table 6 compares the posttest mean scores for the two groups.

**Table 6. The Comparison of Students' Mean Cultural Awareness by Target Cultures**

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		$t$ -test for Equality of Means				
		$F$	$Sig.$	$t$	$df$	$Sig.$ (2-Mean tailed)	(2-Mean Difference)	Std. Error Difference
Brit_cult	Equal variances assumed	.005	.944	6.627	66	.000	4.206	.635
	Equal variances not assumed			6.627	65.999	.000	4.206	.635
Am_cult	Equal variances assumed	.078	.781	5.396	66	.000	5.206	.965
	Equal variances not assumed			5.396	64.831	.000	5.206	.965
Mor_cult	Equal variances assumed	.002	.960	7.965	66	.000	7.294	.916
	Equal variances not assumed			7.965	64.706	.000	7.294	.916

Note. *Brit\_cult* = British cultures. *Amer\_cult* = American cultures. *Moro\_cult* = Moroccan cultures

The inferential data on British cultures ( $t(66) = 6.627$ ,  $p < .05$ ), American cultures ( $t(66) = 5.396$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and Moroccan cultures ( $t(66) = 7.965$ ,  $p < .05$ ) reveal that there were statistically significant differences between the experimental and control groups at the level of cultural awareness by target cultures. Astonishingly, the mean score difference for Moroccan cultures ( $MD = 7.294$ ) was remarkably higher than those for the British and American cultures ( $MD = 4.206$  vs.  $MD = 5.206$ ).

### 6.3. Pre-test findings on students' awareness of their home cultures by the 3Ps

**Table 7. Descriptive Statistics of Cultural Awareness with Regard to Students' Home Cultures**

Group Statistics					
	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Cultural products	control group	34	6.8529	2.09085	.35858
	experimental group	34	6.6176	1.45674	.24983
Cultural practices	control group	34	6.5294	2.25946	.38749
	experimental group	34	6.3529	1.73873	.29819
Cultural perspectives	control group	34	3.7059	1.69722	.29107
	experimental group	34	3.2941	1.73257	.29713

The pretest scores on cultural products, cultural practices, and cultural perspectives for the control group ( $M = 6.85$ ,  $M = 6.52$ ,  $M = 3.70$ , respectively) and those for the experimental group ( $M = 6.61$ ,  $M = 6.35$ ,  $M = 3.29$ , respectively) were almost the same. Similarly, the observed standard deviations for the two groups were very similar with reference to the 3Ps. The observed close standard deviations indicate that students' scores on cultural products, practices, and perspectives clustered around the observed mean scores. These scores also mean that there was no much variability among the students in both groups. For the researcher to decide whether a statistically significant difference existed between the two groups' average performance on cultural practices by

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target culture, the mean scores were compared using an independent sample t-test. Table 8 compares the posttest mean scores for the two groups.

**Table 8. The Comparison of Students' Mean Cultural Awareness by types of culture**

Independent Samples Test		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances													
		F		Sig.		t		df		Sig. (2-tailed)		Mean Difference		Std. Error Difference	
Cult_prod	Equal variances assumed	3.248	.076	.538	66	.592	.23529	.43703							
	Equal variances not assumed			.538	58.928	.592	.23529	.43703							
Cult_pract	Equal variances assumed	1.686	.199	.361	66	.719	.17647	.48895							
	Equal variances not assumed			.361	61.936	.719	.17647	.48895							
Cult_persp	Equal variances assumed	.035	.853	.990	66	.326	.41176	.41595							
	Equal variances not assumed			.990	65.972	.326	.41176	.41595							

Note. *cult\_prod* = Cultural products. *Cult\_pract* = cultural practices. *Cult\_persp* = cultural perspectives

The inferential data on cultural products ( $t(66) = .538, p > .05$ ), cultural practices ( $t(66) = .361, p > .05$ ), and cultural perspectives ( $t(66) = .990, p > .05$ ) reveal that statistically significant differences did not exist between the experimental and control groups at the level of the 3Ps before the study. These findings indicate that both groups were very similar regarding their knowledge of home cultures at the level of cultural products, cultural practices, and cultural perspectives.

### 6.4. Posttest findings on students' awareness of their home cultures by the 3Ps

**Table 9. Descriptive Statistics of Cultural Awareness with Regard to Students' Home Cultures**

Group Statistics					
	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Cultural products	control group	34	9.4118	1.53973	.26406
	exper_group	34	7.8529	1.35137	.23176
Cultural practices	control group	34	7.7941	2.14306	.36753
	exper_group	34	11.7353	2.32651	.39899
Cultural perspectives	control group	34	4.7941	1.36580	.23423
	exper_group	34	7.1765	.96830	.16606

The post-test scores on cultural products for the control group ( $M = 9.41$ ) and that of the experimental group ( $M = 7.85$ ) differed in favor of the control group. In contrast, the scores on cultural practices and cultural perspectives for the control group ( $M = 7.79$  vs.  $M = 4.79$ , respectively) and those of the experimental group ( $M = 11.73$  vs.  $M = 7.17$ , respectively) were different in favor of the experimental group. Similarly, the observed standard deviations for the two groups by the 3Ps were similar. The observed close standard deviations indicate there was no much variability among the students in both groups. For the researcher to decide whether a statistically significant difference existed between the two groups' average performance on cultural products, cultural practices, and cultural perspectives, the mean scores were compared using an independent sample t-test. Table 10 compares the posttest mean scores for the two groups.

**Table 10. The Comparison of Students' Mean Cultural Awareness by types of culture**

Independent Samples Test		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances													
		F		Sig.		t		df		Sig. (2-tailed)		Mean Difference		Std. Error Difference	
Cult_prod	Equal variances assumed	.434	.512	4.437	66	.000	1.55882	.35134							

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	Equal variances not assumed			4.437	64.907	.000	1.55882	.35134
Cult_pract	Equal variances assumed	.032	.858	-7.265	66	.000	-3.94118	.54247
	Equal variances not assumed			-7.265	65.560	.000	-3.94118	.54247
Cult_persp	Equal variances assumed	2.170	.145	-8.297	66	.000	-2.38235	.28713
	Equal variances not assumed			-8.297	59.483	.000	-2.38235	.28713

Note. *cult\_prod* = Cultural products. *Cult\_pract* = cultural practices. *Cult\_persp* = cultural perspectives

Based on the inferential data, a statistically significant difference in favor of the control group existed in the posttest scores on cultural products ( $t(66) = 4.43, p < .05$ ). On the contrary, the inferential data output on cultural practices ( $t(66) = -7.26, p < .05$ ) and cultural perspectives ( $t(66) = -8.29, p < .05$ ) reveal that statistically significant differences existed between the experimental and control groups after the study. Taken as a whole, the students who learned about their home cultures using the textbook together with comparative and contrastive approach significantly improved their cultural products. In contrast, the participants who were exposed to their home cultures through PjBL and comparative approach significantly improved their cultural practices and cultural perspectives following project work completion.

### 6.5. Focus group results

After the focus group discussion came to an end, the researcher summarized the notes. Below is the synthesis of the answers given. *Question 1. How did learning about British and American cultures help you learn more about your home culture? Give examples.*

The answers to this question were positive as all the research subjects claimed that their knowledge of their home cultures was improved while comparing them with the English cultures. When invited to state some examples, most of the subjects felt that comparing their own cultures with the English cultures helped them learn “a lot of things” with regard to the five themes. Most respondents stressed that they have learned about the attitudes, values, perceptions, and beliefs that drive cultural products and practices. One of the participants said that “before the projects, I did not know why people do many things in life.” When asked to explain more, students gave more examples of the unspoken rules that drive both products and practices: celebrations, including Ashura in the Sunni and Shi’ist communities.

*Question 2. How did the project work tasks help you relate cultural products to cultural practices and cultural products to cultural perspectives?*

Most respondents highlighted that the PW tasks taught them to think about culture by asking three questions (*what* = products, *how* = practices, and *why* = perspectives). They also stated that both cultural products and practices are interrelated, and the two are driven by the values and attitudes ingrained in people’s cultures.

*Question 3. Which of the 3Ps was difficult to learn about?*

All the interviewees agreed that cultural perspectives were too challenging to find out compared to products and practices.

### 6.6. Reflective reports findings

As stated in the methodology section, the research participants were required to submit a short reflective report on what they learned about the culture after presenting the end-products. So as to help students to write their reports, eight questions were provided by the researcher. After all the reports were collected, the researcher analyzed them. Below are the most recurrent answers given to the questions in the five projects. Some answers were reported as the participants wrote them; others were corrected in terms of language, and others were translated into English. The researcher presented the data by projects.

*Question: What have you learned about Moroccan cultures that you didn’t know before doing the projects with reference to the five thematic units having been explored?*

Students’ written responses suggested that they all have improved their cultural knowledge with respect to the five thematic units. Below are the most recurrent ideas highlighted across all the submitted reports.

#### Project 1. Education

- Illiteracy is a big rate in Morocco.
- The government has made a lot of efforts to improve education, but it is not enough.
- I learned about the Moroccan system of education. It is not as developed as the American and British ones, and we have a large number of illiterate people in Morocco (*edited*).
- Illiteracy has been reduced in recent years, but the system of education from 1999 to 2019 is the same (*edited*).
- I learned about how many students have access to private and public schools.
- Frankly, I knew all about the system of education and illiteracy in Morocco.

#### Project 2: Marriage Traditions and celebrations

- I knew the reasons why Moroccan celebrate Ashura.

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- I learned about the origin of some traditions in Moroccan wedding ceremonies.
- I learned that Sunni and Shi'ist people celebrate Ashura for different reasons for the Ashura celebration.
- Every area has its own marriage traditions.
- I learned about some traditions in Morocco, and I did not know them in the past.
- I learned that the Moroccan marriage tradition is different and beyond compare (*translated*).

### Project 3: women and power

- Moroccan women are undervalued (*translated*).
- Moroccan women still suffer from discrimination and a lot of problems.
- Women are not equally represented in politics (*edited*).
- Women in Morocco are still viewed as housewives.
- I learn that the number of women in parliament is the result of the quota system.
- Women in Morocco are the victim of people's misunderstanding of the Quran (*edited*).

### Project 4: Humor

- I learned that Jamal Debbouz is the founder of Marrakesh du Rire Festival. He did that to promote tolerance (*edited*).
- I learned nothing about Humor (*translated*).
- I learned that humor in Morocco is not important, and we do not have great comedians. (*translated*)

### Project 5: Internet penetration and online shopping

- I learned that haggling over the price is the top reason why many people in Morocco do not shop online (*edited*).
- I knew how many people have Internet access and how many people use the 4G Internet in Morocco.
- I learned that Morocco does not make mobile phones because all the phones we use in Morocco are not Moroccans.
- I learned that Morocco is not a developed country when it comes to technology (*edited*).
- I learned that one of the main reasons why online shopping is growing slowly in Morocco is time. People have enough time to go shopping, unlike in the UK and the USA (*edited*)

## 7. DISCUSSION

This study investigated the effect of comparing cultures through project-based learning on students' cultural awareness of their home cultures. More specifically, it aimed at determining whether EFL learners at a Moroccan secondary school improve their awareness of their home cultures as a result of comparing and contrasting them with the English cultures (the UK and the USA) through project-based learning. Based on the inferential statistics, the pre-cultural awareness test findings exhibited that a statistically significant difference in the mean scores between the experimental and the control groups did not exist, which indicates that the participants' awareness of the English cultures and their home cultures were similar prior to the treatment. In contrast, the results on the post-cultural awareness test exhibited a statistically significant difference in the two groups' mean scores. Moreover, in the interest of understanding which types of culture students learned about more, the researcher compared the pre- and posttest scores on students' knowledge of the Moroccan cultures in terms of products, practices, and perspectives. Based on the posttest findings, the control-group students significantly improved their understanding of cultural products. In contrast, the treatment-group students significantly enhanced their knowledge of cultural practices and cultural perspectives.

Although the scores were significantly higher on the posttest than on the pretest in favor of the treatment group, the mean score difference (MSD) for Moroccan cultures (MSD = 7.294) was remarkably greater than those for British cultures (MSD = 4.206) and American cultures (MSD = 5.206). This positive difference suggests that students improved their understanding of their home cultures more closely than the English cultures after the treatment. Since the external and internal variables that could have threatened the validity of the study were controlled, the researcher strongly believes that the process of comparing and contrasting cultures through PjBL was the fundamental factor that led the treatment-group students to the outperformance. In this regard, Clouet (2006) pointed out that "the process of comparison and contrast will lead not only to a better appraisal of the target culture but also to a greater understanding of the learners' own culture" (p. 57). In this study, the two groups were required to compare and contrast the English cultures with their home cultures based on the five topics through different tools: textbooks and project-based learning. Despite the parity between the two groups in terms of the cultural content, it is worth mentioning that the characteristics of each tool were believed to have played a vital role in shaping the posttest results. Because the control-group students were introduced to the three cultures through textbooks, open-class discussions, and in-class follow-up activities only, their exposure to the culture was restricted in both content and time. In contrast, the treatment-group students were methodically required to explore the same culture content outside the classroom autonomously using the stimulus questions. What does this mean? By exploring the cultures through multiple authentic resources beyond the textbooks for six months, the experimental group students' learning about cultures is unrestricted in content and time. That is, they were exposed to more similarities and differences among the three cultures. Beckett

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(2002) pointed out that “what students learn during their project work cannot always be anticipated in advance” (p. 54). The researcher believes that the nature of PjBL provided the experimental group students with more time and massive exposure to more content, which have largely contributed to the development of students’ overall cultural awareness among the treatment group students. These two factors were missing in the control groups as a result of regular instruction.

Another significant factor that could substantially have helped the treatment-group students enhance their knowledge of their home cultures was the utilization of stimulus questions. In order to draw the treatment group students to both similarities and differences among the three cultures, the researcher provided the researchers with a set of guiding questions during the data collection stage. The suggested list of stimulus questions was meant to guide and help the participants examine their own cultures in relation to the English cultures in terms of similarities and differences through the seven-step process. Each teamwork was requested to use the same stimulus questions to search the cultural sub-topics in the three cultures. That is, the questions they used to gather data on their home cultures were exactly the same questions used to collect information about the English cultures. The researcher believes that collecting, analyzing, synthesizing, and presenting the cultural information about the three cultures led students to important discoveries about their home cultures. Put differently, the active involvement of the research participants in discovering the English cultures in relation to their home cultures through the seven-step process was strongly believed to have helped students deepen their knowledge of their home cultures.

Even if the parity between the two groups was maintained before the study, the control group students’ exposure to both similarities and differences was limited to the textbooks, handouts, and open-class discussions. These boundaries within which the control group learned about the cultures could have explained the obtained scores with respect to the types of cultures. While the regular instruction helped students improve their knowledge of cultural products of their home cultures, it failed to boost their knowledge of practices and perspectives. On the contrary, the carefully designed guiding questions played a significant role in captivating the treatment group students’ attention to the types of culture. Unlike the control-group students who compared and contrasted the cultures through selected texts, the experimental-group students were required to gather cultural information from authentic resources online, compile it, compare it in terms of similarities and differences, and synthesize it. It is believed that through these processes, students were encouraged to link the cultural products and practices to cultural perspectives. In so doing, students’ knowledge of the target cultures revolved around not only factual information and cultural practices but also the underlying principles that govern those products and practices, including values, attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs held by the members of those cultures. The opportunity to reflect on cultural products and practices and how cultural perspectives govern the two were believed to have helped the experimental group students develop an in-depth understanding of their home cultures. Data from the reflective reports and the focus group suggested that the research participants related cultural products and practices to perspectives, which has made their cultural awareness level transcend facts to include the underlying beliefs and values that govern the observable cultural aspects and behaviors.

The experimental group students’ enhancement of their understanding of their home cultures congruently aligns with the cultural goal stated in the Standards for Foreign language Learning (2006). According to the standards, learners should demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the cultural products, cultural practices, and perspectives of the cultures studied. The same goal is explicitly stated in the Moroccan syllabus for secondary school. Based on the syllabus, “students will gain a deeper understanding of their cultures and other cultures in terms of their perspectives, practices, and products” (p.5). Fantini and Fantini (1997) referred to the three-construct framework using new terminology; he pointed out that for students to strengthen their understanding of both language and culture, they ought to make use of the three interconnected aspects of culture: (1) artifacts (things people make), (2) sociofacts (how people come together and for what purpose) and (3) mentifacts (what people think or believe). When students relate the knowledge of products and practices to that of perspectives, they go beyond observable items to the significance and social uses of those items. In this regard, Tang (2006) argued that students should know not only the *what* and *how* about culture but also the *why*. It is the knowledge of *why* that empowers the memory about a second culture accumulated in the learning process. Only when the knowledge of *what* is strengthened by the knowledge of *why* can the learner of a foreign language perform successfully in the target culture. In this study, the PjBL students were led systematically under the instructor’s guidance to uncover the *what*, the *how*, and the *why* about the English cultures in relation to their home cultures. While comparing and contrasting cultures through regular instruction did not help the control group students transcend the factual information about their home cultures, comparing and contrasting them via project-based learning tremendously expanded the experimental-group students’ knowledge of the practices and the values, beliefs, perceptions, attitudes that drive both products and practices.

### **CONCLUSION**

The results of this study should be considered in light of several limitations that could have affected the findings. The research setting constraints made it harder for the researcher to use a true experimental design. The scores on the pre-cultural awareness revealed that the two groups were similar with reference to their knowledge of their home cultures; however, differences among the intact groups’ members could have existed. The findings could differ provided that a pre- and posttest control group design with

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random assignment of the individuals was utilized. Also, that the sample used was small and that the study was conducted in a public school in the southeast of Morocco have decreased the generalizability of the results to other Moroccan secondary schools. Additionally, the target cultures chosen for this study were the English cultures (American and British cultures), and the topics were dictated by mandated textbooks. The results could have differed if the other target cultures had been added.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is to declare that this paper is original, and no part has been taken from any other work without permission. This is also to declare that the paper has not been published anywhere and is not under consideration for publication by any journal.

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