

Unpacking TV Series as an Intercultural Learning Tool for EFL Students in a Chinese University

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how the sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat* fosters intercultural communicative competence (ICC) among Chinese EFL undergraduates within a semester-long course. Drawing on “foundation –form–competence” framework (Peng, et al. 2020), it analyzes students’ perceptions and experiences through qualitative interviews. Findings show that serialized media, paired with scaffolded discussion and reflective writing, enhances learners’ (inter)cultural awareness, critical thinking, and emotional engagement. While language and cultural references posed challenges, structured mediation supported deeper ICC development. The study highlights the pedagogical value of integrating authentic media into EFL curricula and offers a context-specific model for intercultural teaching in Chinese higher education.

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Contribution/Originality: The paper's primary contribution is finding that critical, scaffolded engagement with serialized media enables EFL learners to transition from passive cultural reception to active identity reflection, thereby offering an empirical blueprint for integrating multi-dimensional intercultural pedagogy into higher education classrooms.

1. Introduction

In a world highly integrated through global transit and digital proximity, developing intercultural understanding among interconnected societies has arguably reached a point of paramount importance (Mishan, 2023). As English continues to serve as a global lingua franca, the competence to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural contexts has become a core component of global citizenship (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). In recent years, increasing global interconnectedness has further elevated Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) as a central objective in foreign

language education. There is a growing consensus that language proficiency alone is insufficient; effective foreign language use also requires intercultural awareness and critical thinking (Byram, 2009; Donaghy, 2019). ICC entails the skills necessary to navigate communication across cultural boundaries, making it indispensable in today's interconnected world (Matei, 2022; Hei et al., 2019). Consistent with this global trend, China's Ministry of Education (MOE, 2020) has identified ICC as a key developmental goal in English Language Teaching (ELT). However, the integration of intercultural education into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction remains underdeveloped in practice (Peng et al., 2015). As Holliday (2013) notes, language teaching often continues to prioritize linguistic form over intercultural meaning, limiting its effectiveness in preparing students for real-world communication. In the Chinese EFL context, this challenge is further compounded by the linguistically and culturally homogeneous nature of most students' learning environments, which offer limited opportunities for authentic intercultural interaction. Therefore, there is a pressing need to design well-structured curricula that integrate language learning with intercultural communication. Such courses can better equip Chinese EFL learners with the competence required to engage meaningfully in global intercultural encounters.

To better immerse EFL learners in real-life intercultural contexts, English language practitioners have increasingly turned to authentic audiovisual materials as a more engaging and effective way to foster ICC in the classroom (Donaghy, 2019; Çakır, 2022). Such resources offer a rich tapestry of cultural insights that textbooks may lack (Fatih, 2020). Their integration into EFL instruction can facilitate learners to engage with complex intercultural discourses, moving beyond traditional text-based approaches and encouraging critical analysis from diverse cultural perspectives (Ayunon & Haloc, 2021). This pedagogical approach is embodied in the present study through the "Language and Intercultural Communication (LIC)" course, which incorporates the American sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat (FOTB)* as a central medium for intercultural instruction. The sitcom portrays the lived experiences of a Chinese immigrant family in the United States, addressing themes such as cultural identity, cultural conflict, and acculturation (Chen et al., 2023). The themes revealed in the sitcom's episodes not only offer rich material for intercultural classroom discussion, but also closely align with the core topics outlined in the LIC course syllabus.

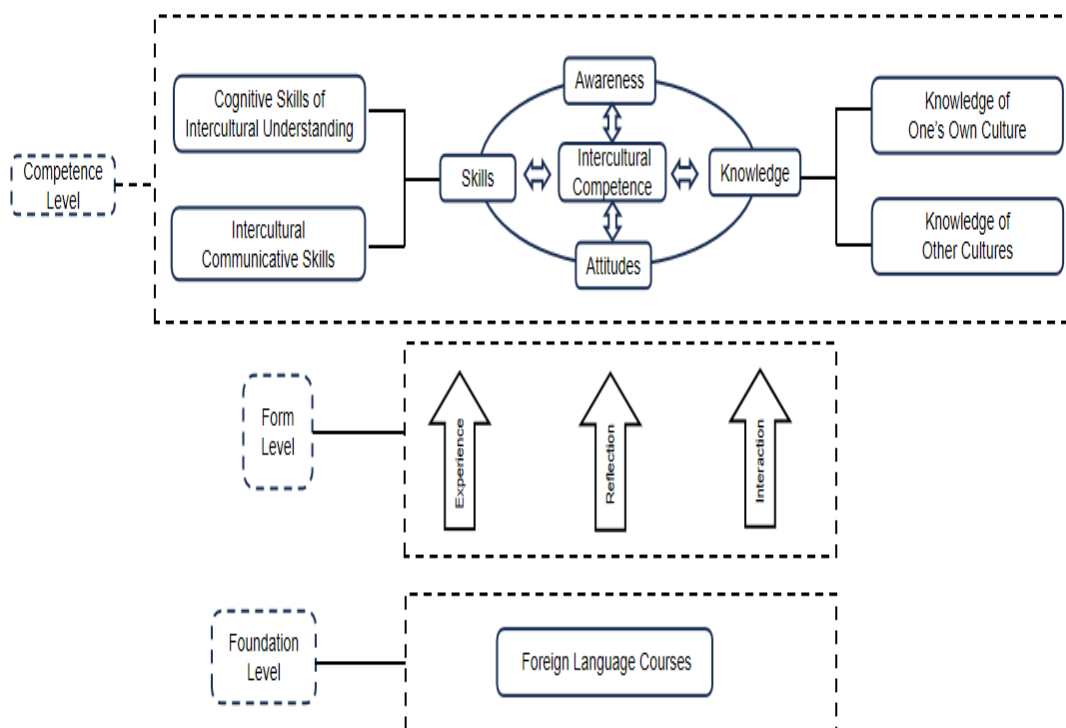
While several studies have examined the role of audiovisual media in English language teaching (ELT), limited research has specifically explored the use of TV series to facilitate learners' ICC within formal classroom settings—particularly through well-validated theoretical and practical models of intercultural foreign language teaching that are tailored to EFL educational context in China. Thus, this study reports the intercultural learning experiences of Chinese undergraduate EFL learners as they engage with the sitcom *FOTB* in a LIC course, guided by "the three-level theoretical model of intercultural foreign language teaching" (Peng et al., 2020, p.47). By exploring how media-supported instruction facilitates learners' ICC and the challenges they encounter throughout this process, this study aims to deepen the understanding of media-assisted intercultural language teaching and provide practical insights for its effective implementation in EFL classroom settings.

1.1. Research Objectives

Despite increasing emphasis on ICC at the policy level in China's foreign language education, significant challenges remain in its classroom implementation. For example,

Maele and Jin (2022) highlight a persistent gap between policy and practice, noting that although ICC is prominently featured in national curriculum standards, it is often inadequately incorporated into classroom instruction and assessment. What's more, instructional content tends to prioritize surface-level cultural knowledge, while critical dimensions, such as identity, power relations, and cultural representation, are frequently overlooked (Holmes et.al, 2022). EFL teachers often lack access to appropriate pedagogical frameworks, targeted training, and instructional resources necessary for designing reflective and experiential ICC tasks (Qian, 2024). Consequently, Chinese EFL learners are seldom engaged in structured intercultural learning experiences that enable a meaningful progression from basic cultural awareness to critical cultural consciousness. These persistent gaps underscore the need for theoretically grounded and contextually appropriate frameworks to support sustainable ICC development within Chinese university EFL contexts.

Figure 1: Three-Level Theoretical Framework of Intercultural Foreign Language Education (Translated from Peng, et.al, 2020, p.47)



To tackle the persistent issues of the gap between theory and practice, insufficient teacher assistance, and superficial learning in China's EFL intercultural education, the "foundation-form-competence" framework (Peng et al. 2020) offers this study a contextually appropriate and pedagogically guideline (see Figure 1). At the foundation level, sitcoms, like FOTB, aid in the institutionalization of ICC development by being integrated into credit bearing courses. The form level encompasses active, reflective and interactive forms of learning, in this study, scaffolded group discussion and reflective writing tasks were used. At the competence level, the model makes provision for the students to develop intercultural attitudes and critical knowledge as well as skills. This model provides a more integrated approach to the ICC in Chinese EFL settings by linking curricular design to learner experience. This study aims to understand how students perceived the outcomes of media-assisted learning within this structure and how their

outcomes resulted from interplay of pedagogical design and learner participation in the process.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Audiovisual Materials in Intercultural Foreign Language Teaching

The pedagogical value of audiovisual media has traditionally been linked to its capacity to enhance learners' listening comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and pragmatic language use by offering authentic, context-rich input (Çakır, 2022; Schat et al., 2021; Shabani & Zanussi, 2015). Unlike conventional textbooks, audiovisual media expose students to native-like pronunciation, slang, and culturally embedded colloquial expressions. Such resources also convey both explicit and implicit cultural elements that are often absent from traditional or decontextualized teaching materials (Holden, 2000; Sherman, 2003). Apart from language acquisition, audiovisual materials also contribute to intercultural understanding and developing intercultural awareness (Tomlinson, 2019) by giving learners more passive access to different norms, cultures, and values, which are integral parts of ICC (Fatih, 2020; Liao & Li, 2020). As a result, through diverse educational contexts, research consistently highlights the integrative role of media in language classrooms, not only as a tool for teaching language and culture but also as a medium for promoting critical pedagogy and meaningful communication.

In recent years, a growing body of research has explored how audiovisual media can support the development of ICC in EFL contexts. Chao (2013) demonstrated that students' exposure to multicultural films, coupled with reflective writing, promoted shifts in attitudes, awareness, and behavioral intentions toward cultural others. Likewise, Mudawe (2020) pointed out that sitcoms like *Friends* provide learners with access to culturally bound expressions and nonverbal communication cues that enhance both language learning and cultural understanding. In Iranian EFL contexts, Tirnaz and Zarafshan (2018) found that even short-format media such as TV advertisements can significantly boost students' intercultural sensitivity and improve classroom climate when integrated into a situated learning framework. Meanwhile, Yang and Fleming (2013) underscored the importance of viewing learners as active meaning-makers rather than passive recipients when interpreting foreign media, noting that students construct understanding through personal, contextualized reflection.

Collectively, most existing studies on the use of audiovisual materials in intercultural foreign language education have focused on films. Compared with films, which often condense cultural narratives, TV series allow for a more nuanced and repetitive exploration of culture, making them particularly effective for long-term intercultural education (Ping, 2020). Their extended format enables deeper cultural immersion through sustained exposure to character development and evolving intercultural dynamics. This prolonged engagement fosters emotional and cognitive connections, enhancing learners' understanding of cultural complexity and promoting intercultural sensitivity (Tirasawasdichai et al., 2022; Çakır, 2022; Nguyen, 2022). Moreover, the multimodal and episodic nature of TV series creates a rich learning environment that supports critical interpretive skills and communicative competence, especially for intermediate EFL learners (Sederberg, 2021). In short, TV series can offer learners extended exposure to intercultural dynamics over time, providing deeper insights into processes of cultural adaptation and identity transformation. Despite these advantages, empirical research that systematically integrates entire TV series into structured EFL

curricula, especially as central rather than supplementary content, remains limited. Moreover, few seldom situate their interventions within a structured pedagogical framework or systematically address the challenges students face when engaging with culturally rich media. To address these gaps, this study adopts the “foundation–form–competence” teaching framework (Peng et.al., 2020, p.47) within a semester-long Intercultural Communication course, where FOTB is used as the central instructional material. Rather than merely using FOTB as an after-class viewing task, the current study investigates EFL learners’ perceptions of FOTB’s impact on their ICC and examines the specific challenges they encounter when engaging with media in a structured EFL curriculum. Thus, this study sets out to address the two following research questions:

RQ1: How do EFL students perceive the impact of TV series such as *Fresh Off the Boat* on their intercultural communication competence?

RQ2: What challenges do EFL students encounter when using TV series such as *Fresh Off the Boat* in their English language curricula?

3. Research Methods

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore how EFL learners negotiate intercultural meaning through serialized media. A qualitative approach is highly justified for this investigation, as it allows for an in-depth, nuanced understanding of participants’ subjective experiences, emotional responses, and reflective processes within a specific pedagogical setting (Hood, 2009).

The research was conducted within a “Language and Intercultural Communication” (LIC) course at a university located in Guangdong, China. This specific location and context were selected because the university serves a diverse student body and emphasizes the internationalization of higher education, making its EFL classrooms an ideal environment for investigating intercultural communicative competence (ICC). The course adopted a blended learning format, incorporating media-based reflective tasks and multimodal instructional strategies. A core feature of the curriculum was the systemic integration of the American sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat* (FOTB), which was utilized across lectures, group discussions, and reflective writing assignments to facilitate critical intercultural reflections.

The target population for this study comprised non-English major undergraduate students enrolled in elective intercultural communication modules in China. Purposive sampling was employed to select the specific participants for this study. This non-probability sampling technique is methodologically justified because it allows the researcher to select information-rich cases that can deliberately address the research questions and provide deep insights into the qualitative phenomena under investigation (Palinkas et al., 2015).

A total sample size of 12 students (N = 12) was recruited for the semi-structured interviews. In qualitative research, this sample size is justified as it aligns with the principles of data saturation, ensuring sufficient depth and generic redundancy of themes regarding classroom experiences without leading to statistical overcrowding (Guest et al., 2006). The participants came from various academic disciplines, including Chinese Studies, Thai Language, Architecture, and Civil Engineering (see Table 1 for detailed demographic profiles). All participants possessed an intermediate level of

English proficiency, which enabled them to engage meaningfully with the authentic serialized media and participate productively in subsequent classroom discussions. Strict ethical procedures regarding research involving human subjects were maintained throughout the study lifecycle. Institutional ethical approval was obtained from the research context. Prior to data collection, written informed consent was obtained from all 12 participants. The consent form clearly detailed the research objectives, the voluntary nature of participation, and the participants' right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any academic or personal penalty. To guarantee strict confidentiality and anonymity, all personal identifiers were removed, and pseudonyms were assigned to all participants during data transcription, analysis, and reporting (Guest et al., 2006).

Table 1: Study Participants

No.	Name	Gender	Major
1	Michael	Male	Civil Engineering
2	Cindy	Female	Chinese Language
3	Sofia	Female	Thai Language
4	Anne	Female	Chinese Studies
5	Lucy	Female	Spanish Language
6	Shawn	Male	Civil Engineering
7	Nina	Female	Chinese Studies
8	Rain	Female	Thai Language
9	Bennett	Female	Chinese Studies
10	Ng	Female	Civil Engineering
11	Chan	Male	Architecture
12	Jimmy	Male	Civil Engineering

Data were primarily gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted at the end of the semester. This specific timing and format were chosen to provide a flexible yet focused framework within which participants could comprehensively retrospect on their learning trajectory and freely explore emerging topics (Richards, 2009). The interview protocol was developed by the authors, with items derived from literature on Byram's ICC model and media-based language pedagogy.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the instrument, a pilot testing phase was conducted prior to the main study. Two students who shared similar characteristics with the target population but were not included in the final sample participated in a pilot interview. This procedure allowed the authors to refine the interview protocol, adjust the wording, and ensure item clarity, comprehensibility, and pedagogical relevance (Turner, 2010). Prior to the formal individual interviews, all 12 participants completed a structured sequence of pedagogical activities over the semester: they watched 13 selected episodes of *FOTB*, completed three reflective journals, and participated in structured peer group discussions. These scaffolding activities served as the contextual baseline, designed to facilitate their conceptual understanding of ICC and foster deeper levels of critical reflective engagement before they articulated their experiences in the interviews.

Following the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013), the verbal data from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using a six-phase model of thematic analysis. This method affords high methodological flexibility while maintaining

systematic rigor, making it effective for identifying, analyzing, and reporting recurring patterns within qualitative datasets.

All audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. During the initial familiarization phase, the transcripts were read repeatedly alongside the audio playback to ensure deep immersion in the raw data. An inductive coding approach was subsequently adopted through a rigorous manual coding process, without the aid of qualitative data analysis software. Specifically, data management and code generation were performed manually by using word-processing software to systematically highlight meaningful text segments and generate descriptive margins/comments. These manually generated initial codes were then physically grouped and conceptualized using visual tables and matrix spreadsheets. This inductive process allowed initial codes and themes to emerge spontaneously from the participants' lived experiences without being constrained by pre-imposed theoretical categories (Nowell et al., 2017). First-order codes included concepts such as *cultures of reflection regarding intercultural learning*, *cultural self-identification*, *language emotionality*, *affective responses*, and *the integration of theory and practice*. These initial codes were subsequently clustered and aggregated into several superordinate themes, which are detailed in the Findings section.

To establish rigorous intercoder reliability and minimize subjective interpretive bias, the emerging coding scheme and thematic structure were refined and cross-checked in collaboration with a co-researcher specializing in intercultural communication. Discrepancies in coding were discussed until a 100% consensus was achieved. Furthermore, credibility and trustworthiness were enhanced through participant validation (member-checking), whereby selected participants reviewed the transcripts and thematic summaries to confirm that the interpretations accurately reflected their original perspectives. Finally, thick descriptions and direct, verbatim participant quotations are embedded throughout the findings to maximize descriptive transparency (Nowell et al., 2017). The overarching analytical objective was to evaluate the pedagogical affordances and constraints of utilizing serialized media in EFL classrooms to support cross-cultural integration and competence development.

4. Results

4.1. EFL Students' Perceptions of the Impact of TV Series on Their intercultural communicative competence

The analysis shows a positive reception from participants towards the FOTB, praising its capacity to depict culture, connect theory to practice, and enhance the learning and retention of intercultural communication (IC). Participants considered the sitcom a helpful resource for developing cultural perception, strengthening theoretical comprehension, and providing real-life situations in intercultural relations. This report provides results organized under six major themes that explain the shifts in EFL students' Intercultural Competence (intercultural communicative competence) stemming from the incorporation of television series into the English language curriculum.

4.1.1. Enhancing Cultural Understanding

One of the most important concepts participants identified was how FOTB's are central to their understanding of cultural diversity and intercultural competence. A few

participants (3/12) noted the series as a reason for advancing their understanding of cultural diversity appreciation beyond the basic levels to a deeper and more critical appreciation of IC.

For example, Cindy explained how the Huang family's acculturation to America gave her useful knowledge about the intercultural issues that immigrants deal with, and why it is imperative to have mutual respect in intercultural relations:

"The series vividly depicts the immigration experiences of a family, which helped me understand that telling people what to do and how to communicate with each other from different cultures does not mean that they respect cultural diversity."

Cindy's statement highlights some Chinese parents' frustrations with their children's American culture. Equally, Chan reported how the FOTB assisted her in understanding the US-China cultural difference and provided her with an understanding of intercultural relations.

"The series helps one appreciate the cultures of America and China and the important aspects of the relationship that exists between the two nations."

Participants (5/12) in the discussion went further than simply appreciating the differences. They also discuss the weathered forms of intercultural adaptation, as represented by the Huang family. Anne reflected on how the show effectively illustrated cultural integration as a dynamic and multi-faceted process:

"Through intercultural communication, we learn about the customs, rules, and habits of the host country... The Huang family speaks English, eats Western food, and Louis earns a business opportunity by adopting Orlando's communication styles... Eddie firmly stands up against derogatory comments about China, defending his cultural pride. "

Such analysis indicates that FOTB not only improved EFL students' cultural sensitivity, but also provoked deeper consideration of intercultural communication aspects, which shaped their understanding of culture change and identity conflict in more sophisticated ways.

4.1.2. Making Intercultural Theories Tangible through Real-World Scenarios

Most participants (9/12) emphasized how FOTB successfully translated abstract intercultural communication theories into relatable, real-world scenarios. They noted that the series bridged the gap between theory and practice, making complex concepts more comprehensible and applicable.

Rain, for example, described how the show visualized theoretical IC principles, reinforcing classroom discussions:

"The series featured numerous scenes demonstrating intercultural communication that we learned from the LIC textbook we used, allowing us to see how the characters handled such issues... This provided a clear

and direct understanding of intercultural communication concepts in real-life contexts.”

Similarly, Nina reflected on how the FOTB’s depiction of conflict resolution strategies closely aligned with textbook theories, reinforcing key takeaways from her coursework:

“ The show provided a vivid illustration of the cultural differences between China and the West... It taught me that successful intercultural communication requires understanding and respecting other cultures while expressing oneself politely and clearly to avoid misunderstandings and conflicts, as presented in Unit 8 of my textbook.”

Additionally, the participants appreciated the show’s entertainment-education model. Shawn noted how the engaging nature of TV series facilitated a relaxed learning environment, making intercultural learning feel more natural:

“The greatest benefit of using TV series for learning is integrating the task into everyday entertainment. Over time, this helps improve English skills, particularly the confidence to speak English. “

These responses highlight how FOTB effectively links classroom theory with lived experience, demonstrating the potential of media to deepen intercultural competence in EFL education.

4.1.3. Challenging Stereotypes and Cultural Biases

Beyond enhancing cultural awareness, participants (3/12) reported that the FOTB helped them challenge stereotypes and prejudices, particularly those related to Chinese culture. Michael pointed to a key moment in the series that deconstructed misconceptions about Chinese cuisine, illustrating how exposure to firsthand experiences can dismantle ingrained biases:

“Chinese food is often rejected because of such stereotypes. The series also shows that foreigners are full of praise after trying Chinese food. It is clear that breaking stereotypes is about trying things out, not about what you think.”

Similarly, Sofia reflected on Eddie’s experiences with discrimination at school, emphasizing how the series realistically portrayed the emotional and social impact of cultural misunderstandings:

“Eddie faces ridicule and exclusion from his White classmates, who mock his Chinese food as ‘smelly’ and ‘like bugs.’ This scene precisely describes how cultural differences affect intercultural communication.”

These thoughts demonstrate that the FOTB motivated participants to actively challenge stereotypes by promoting cultural empathy and self-reflection.

4.1.4. Facilitating Language Learning through Cultural Exploration

Several participants (5/12) also emphasized how FOTB enhanced their English language learning, particularly in colloquial expressions, pronunciation, and confidence in speaking English.

Michael highlighted how the authenticity of dialogues made TV series a more effective resource than textbooks:

“TV series are an easy way to learn English... They show rich and practical sentences and slang. These idiomatic expressions are not included in textbooks, but they are real English used in daily conversations.”

Similarly, Cindy noted that mimicking characters' speech patterns helped refine her pronunciation and speaking fluency:

“I mimicked the characters' tones during viewing, which improved my spoken English... The characters provided relatable and practical examples of intercultural communication.”

These insights highlight that FOTB was not only an intercultural resource but also a tool for developing linguistic competence.

4.1.5. Emotional Engagement and Critical Reflection in IC

Participants frequently expressed that FOTB elicited emotional engagement, making intercultural communication more relatable and encouraging deeper, critical reflection.

Anne described how the emotional intensity of cultural conflict scenes resonated deeply, reinforcing the reality of intercultural tensions:

“Eddie's passionate defense of China feels realistic and relatable, but it could be seen as less composed than textbook ideals. However, his reaction aligns with real-life emotions, as it is hard to stay calm when facing cultural insults.”

These reflections suggest that the FOTB facilitated a deeper, emotionally driven engagement with intercultural communication, reinforcing the importance of empathy, critical reflection, and adaptability in real-world interactions.

Overall, the findings indicate that FOTB functioned as more than just a pedagogical tool—it was a catalyst for cultural reflection, language development, and stereotype awareness. The series provided a dynamic medium for experiencing, understanding, and critically engaging with intercultural communication, reinforcing its potential as a powerful educational resource in EFL contexts.

4.2. Challenges in Using TV Series for IC Learning in EFL Contexts

Participants experienced a few impediments when using Fresh Off the Boat (FOTB) as a re-source for intercultural communication (IC) teaching and learning in EFL contexts. These impediments tended to center on a lack of understanding, cultural discrepancies, the application of theoretical knowledge to practical situations, and time or material limitations. Thematic analysis is presented in the following subsections to explain in

detail the gaps and issues students encounter when using television series in their IC lessons.

4.2.1. Language Barriers and Comprehension Issues

The most common challenge reported was language comprehension, especially in relation to informal speech, idiomatic language, and even slang. While participants agreed that the series offered some level of exposure to the actual use of English, most were unable to appreciate the in-formal context of speech, which further complicated their understanding.

For example, Michael pointed out the difficulty in understanding slang and idiomatic language because some phrases obstructed comprehension:

“The TV series is an easy way to learn English... but sometimes the slang or certain expressions are difficult to understand, and it is hard to catch the full meaning.”

Similarly, Sofia elaborated on the use of speech skeletons and accents as a hindering factor for participation:

“The accents and informal language used by the characters make it harder to follow, especially when they speak quickly. I miss out on a lot of meaning behind conversations.”

These issues capture the concerns of many EFL learners struggling with the reality of actual speech, which is not structured, in contrast to the limited speech controlled in textbooks. This is something that Shawn also indicated, adding the relevance of the cultural context to the linguistic knowledge that is needed to understand the language.

“The slang and accents used in the show are fun, but they're challenging to catch, especially when I am not familiar with the cultural context.”

Collectively, these ideas indicate that although formal observation teaching practices (FOTB) enhance authentic language interactions, their efficiency is reduced in the absence of further support in the form of aids or guided talks to assist learners in dealing with figurative and culturally loaded language.

4.2.2. Cultural Differences and Misunderstandings

Another significant challenge participants faced was difficulty fully appreciating or relating to the cultural content embedded in FOTB. Even though the series offered an understanding of the American way of life, interpreting cultural references, humor, and other social nuances proved to be detrimental for the students as it caused confusion and lack of engagement.

For example, Cindy felt frustrated by her inability to understand most culture-specific jokes, which led to feelings of marginalization:

"There are some jokes in this series that I do not get due to certain American cultural peculiarities. At times, I feel excluded from the context because of the references."

Similarly, Shawn elaborated on how cultural unfamiliarity affected deeper engagement with the series:

"I enjoy watching the show, but I often miss the deeper meanings behind the cultural references. Some aspects are too specific to American life for me to fully grasp."

Beyond humor, participants noted that understanding intercultural interactions in the show did not always translate into real-life competence. Bennett emphasized this gap, explaining that even when he recognized IC principles in the series, applying them in actual intercultural encounters remained challenging:

"I get the concepts while watching the show, but when I interact with people from other cultures, it is harder to apply what I have seen."

These responses indicate that language and cultural challenges are interconnected, highlighting the need for a more structured approach that integrates cultural background explanations, guided discussions, and real-life applications to help students internalize intercultural knowledge meaningfully.

4.2.3. Difficulty in Applying IC Concepts to Real-Life Situations

Although FOTB provided clear instances of intercultural analysis, several participants struggled to apply these lessons in 'real life' interactions. Students found it challenging to devise ways to make relevant communication strategies with people from different cultures after having seen cultural tensions and accommodative mechanisms in the series.

Bennett described how the theoretical clarity provided by the series did not necessarily translate into practical skills:

"I can see the cultural differences in the series, but when it comes to real-life situations, I find it hard to know how to act or what to say."

Nina echoed a similar sentiment, highlighting the disconnect between observation and practice:

"While watching the show, I understand the issues, but I am not sure how to deal with them when I encounter something similar in a conversation. I suppose it is one thing to watch, but an-other to practice it in real life."

These comments underline that mere observation of media is not enough; learners need an active environment where they can implement the Integrated Communication (IC) techniques before utilizing them in actual environments. This implies that incorporating actual role-playing activities, purposeful conversations, and authentic simulations into EFL teaching systems might be a solution.

4.2.4. Time and Resource Constraints

Participants also identified time and resource limitations as major challenges in using FOTB effective intercultural learning via FOTB. While students recognized its educational value, academic workload and lack of structured guidance often prevented them from fully engaging with the material.

Lucy expressed frustration over the time constraints imposed by other academic commitments, despite her interest in using TV series for learning:

"I'd love to watch more episodes of the series, but it's hard to find the time with all the assignments and other responsibilities. It would be helpful if the course incorporated the show into the curriculum"

Similarly, Michael underscored the need for structured instructional support, as merely watching the series was insufficient for meaningful learning:

"I need more guidance on how to use the show for learning. Watching it on my own does not seem sufficient when there is no accompanying discussion or assignment that assists in breaking down what was viewed."

These difficulties indicate that while TV series can undoubtedly aid intercultural learning, they need to be accompanied by more profound institutional assistance, such as integration into curricula, purposeful assignments, and organized discussions to help motivate students to learn.

According to the above findings, EFL students encounter a plethora of challenges while using FOTB for intercultural learning, primarily language barriers associated with colloquial slang and accents, cultural humor, and even references. This severely limited their engagement with the key IC lessons. Moreover, students noted their lack of ability to relate the concepts of intercultural communication to actual situations, which emphasizes the need for more practice-oriented teaching that executes theory. Their lack of time and resources further complicated their ability to engage with the series, highlighting the need for contextual scaffolding and curricular guidance to aid the learning process. Participants, however, were willing to learn and noted the challenges posed by using TV series for pedagogy; while the series posed some challenges, they could see great potential for aiding in second language acquisition and developing intercultural skills. The series could be more effective if learners were provided with other materials and guided towards discussions and activities that fostered application rather than theorization. Meeting these challenges means that learners can be better prepared to use series as resources for learning about cultures and transfer topical communicative knowledge into practical situations.

5. Discussion

This study confirms several findings from previous research regarding the pedagogical value of integrating audiovisual media into ICC development in EFL classrooms. Similar to Tirnaz & Narafshan (2018), who demonstrated that audiovisual resources like TV advertisements could enhance learners' cultural sensitivity, this study found that FOTB also significantly increased students' cultural awareness and ability to navigate cultural differences. Consistent with Yang & Fleming (2013), the current research supports the

idea that learners can actively construct meaning when exposed to foreign media and that this process fosters a deeper understanding of cultural nuances. In line with Chao's (2013) finding, students in this study reported strong emotional engagement and reflection, which were essential in shaping their intercultural attitudes and empathy. Aligning with Mudawe (2020), this study also revealed that authentic audiovisual materials could expose EFL students to colloquial expressions, cultural-bound language, and non-verbal cues, enhancing both linguistic and cultural competence.

Plus, this study implemented a longitudinal integration of media throughout an entire semester, incorporating 13 episodes in tandem with textbook content. Unlike previous research, which often positioned media as supplementary or standalone resources, this study's sustained and structured approach enabled continuous, scaffolded intercultural learning. It can be noticed that the participants not only consumed the sitcom but also engaged in ongoing reflective activities, such as discussions, group work, and writing tasks, which provided a multidimensional approach to ICC development. However, this study presents challenges students face when engaging in TV series, such as understanding slang, accents, and culturally specific humor. This suggests actionable strategies should be taken to overcome them, such as guided discussion and task-based reflection. Prior studies often emphasized benefits without fully addressing pedagogical constraints or proposing integrative solutions.

However, the present study seeks to extend previous research by exploring new dimensions of how TV series can be systematically integrated into intercultural EFL instruction. Different from the previous studies primarily focusing on Western culture as an external target, this study introduces FOTB as a unique audiovisual resource that centers on the cultural identity of a Chinese American family navigating between two cultures. This "dual cultural lens" offers students a more relatable, explicit and nuanced view of intercultural experience, especially for learners from Chinese back-grounds, thereby enhancing the authenticity and emotional relevance of the learning process. In contrast to films or short-form media such as advertisements used in other study contexts (e.g. Tirnaz & Narafshan,2018; Yang &Fleming,2013), FOTB provides an ongoing storyline and rich cultural settings across episodes with its explicit exploration of Chinese American identity, giving learners the chance to explore complex themes such as adaptation, identity, and cultural blending more thoroughly. Furthermore, it challenges racial and ethnic stereotypes prevalent in Western media and presents cultural identities as complex and fluid rather than static, making it a valuable re-source for EFL learners navigating intercultural exchanges (Wang, 2023). Such immersive and dynamic structure makes it both an effective teaching tool and a meaningful resource for expanding intercultural research in the EFL context. This integrated approach, combining serialized media exposure with textbook content, group discussions, and reflective writing, also directly addresses a concern raised by Qian (2024), who notes that Chinese students are often limited to static, fact-based cultural knowledge (such as festivals or etiquette) in traditional classroom settings. By engaging students in dynamic, narrative-driven cultural experiences, this study facilitates a deeper understanding of the underlying values and sociocultural contexts that shape intercultural interactions, thereby cultivating critical intercultural awareness and more nuanced development of inter-cultural competence.

Also, this study implemented a longitudinal integration of media throughout an entire semester, incorporating 13 episodes in tandem with textbook content. Unlike previous research, which often positioned media as supplementary or standalone resources, this

study's sustained and structured approach enabled continuous, scaffolded intercultural learning. It can be noticed that the participants not only consumed the media but also engaged in ongoing reflective activities, such as discussions, group work, and writing tasks, which provided a multidimensional approach to see their ICC development. However, one of the notable findings this study shows is the linguistic challenges students encounter when engaging in TV series, including difficulties in understanding slang, accents, and culturally specific humor. These issues are particularly evident among Chinese EFL learners, whose classroom experiences are often shaped by a strong dependence on textbooks (Maele & Jin, 2022), leaving them less prepared to interpret informal language and culturally nuanced content. In response, teachers can provide targeted pre-viewing support, such as previewing key slang, idiomatic expressions, and culturally embedded references, to better equip students for what they are about to encounter. Simple techniques like "slang spoilers" or brief cultural primers before each episode can significantly enhance students' comprehension and engagement. While prior studies have largely focused on the benefits of media use, they have seldom addressed these instructional limitations or offered practical, context-sensitive solutions.

Following the three-level theoretical framework of Peng et al. (2020) on the Intercultural Foreign Language Education, this research illustrates in detail how the integration of *Fresh Off the Boat* into a semester-long English course curriculum fostered students' intercultural growth at all levels. For the Foundation Level, the sitcom served as a backdrop for cultural learning through language and provided context. At the Form Level, students reflect and actively interact with the narrative through group work and individual reflective writing. At the Competence Level, there was greater emergence of intercultural knowledge, skills, attitudes, and awareness among the learners. In all, the study shows with an example how students can be guided from simply being 'exposed' to a culture to being fully engaged and possessing 'embodied' intercultural competence through the design of the course. Although some scholars, such as Tomlinson (2019), argue that intercultural competence cannot be fully developed within a language course, since its cultivation requires far more first-hand experience than most classroom settings can offer, this study directly addresses that limitation. In contexts where EFL learners have limited access to real-life intercultural encounters, this study shows how thoughtfully integrated audiovisual materials, such as FOTB, can simulate intercultural experiences within the classroom. By engaging students in reflective tasks that connect course content with the characters' intercultural journeys, the media-embedded LIC course effectively fosters intercultural awareness. Such awareness can support learners not only in enhancing their ICC in the target language, but also in developing as more mature and empathetic individuals (Tomlinson, 2019). Thus, these findings indicate that the pedagogical use of FOTB not only fulfilled but also exemplified the objectives at each level of the theoretical model. The study offers concrete evidence of how foreign language courses, when thoughtfully designed, can move students from exposure to experience, and from reflection to embodied intercultural competence.

This research has several important implications for EFL instructors and intercultural education curriculum design in China, particularly with respect to the recent policy mandate to incorporate ICC into English teaching at the tertiary level (MOE, 2020). FOTB was integrated into a course taught over one semester to illustrate how hybrid, culturally multileveled media can provoke critical reflection on issues of identity, marginalization, and cultural hybridity (Holmes et al., 2022). The integration of episodes and textbook content resulted in schema-driven intercultural learning and the extensive use of intercultural concepts. This integration also met the systemic pedagogical branding

demand in Chinese higher education (Maele & Jin, 2022). The findings also emphasized active, problem-based learning to fill the gap between the gap between observation and actual use of communication, which is an issue raised in Qian's (2024) study on teacher training adequacy. Moreover, pre-viewing and cultural scaffolding aids were found to assist students with informal language and cultural references more than other aids. Emotional engagement with the series contributed to students' empathy and capacity for critical reflection, demonstrating the importance of emotion in intercultural education. Finally, the study advocates for more institutional resources to counterbalance the lack of time, training, and other resources to support the use of ICC integration through media.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the impact of integrating the serialized sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat* into an EFL intercultural communication course for Chinese university students. Our findings reveal that critical engagement with media, supported by reflective and interactive tasks, fostered higher-order intercultural competence across cognitive, emotional, and behavioral domains. This study is one of very few studies which have investigated the systematic integration of serialized media to foster deeper reflexive ICC development in Chinese EFL settings. By demonstrating the effectiveness of structured pedagogical scaffolding, this study extends previous research and offers a contextualized model for experience-centered intercultural pedagogy. Future research could explore the long-term impact of such approaches across diverse educational contexts.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers adhered to the ethical guidelines provided by the University of Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UMREC). All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants according to the Declaration of Helsinki.

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Conflict Interest

The authors declare no conflict of Interest.

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