

Sitcoms in University Foreign Language Education for Intercultural Competence Development: Teacher and Student Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of Intercultural Competence (IC) pedagogy remains challenging in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. To address this gap, this qualitative case study investigates the pedagogical value of integrating a sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat (FOTB)* as a multimodal resource for developing IC in a Chinese university setting. From the perspective of intercultural competence, data was collected through semi-structured interviews with one experienced EFL instructor and two students. Thematic analysis revealed a consistent developmental trajectory in learners, marked by enhanced curiosity, reflective interpretation, and critical cultural awareness, aligning closely with Byram's five IC dimensions. The findings demonstrate that *FOTB* is an effective IC resource when coupled with deliberate pedagogical scaffolding. The affective engagement and narrative realism of the sitcom foster a crucial shift from "learning about culture" to "learning through cultural engagement". Importantly, the study highlights the pivotal role of teacher mediation (e.g., guided dialogue) in transforming challenges like linguistic difficulties or emotional discomfort into opportunities for critical reflection. The study contributes robust evidence of multidimensional IC development and elucidates how intercultural meaning is co-constructed in the EFL classroom. Recommendations are provided for fostering a more reflective and ethically grounded intercultural learning ecology in Chinese university EFL contexts.

Contribution/Originality: The paper's primary contribution lies in elucidating how structured teacher scaffolding transforms the linguistic and schematic challenges of authentic media into reflective learning milestones, establishing an empirical foundation for multidimensional intercultural meaning-making in traditional EFL environments.

1. Introduction

Intercultural competence (IC) is widely defined as the capacity to communicate effectively across diverse cultural backgrounds through the cultivation of cultural awareness, openness, and strategic interaction (Byram, 2009; Hammer, 2015; Kazykhankyzy & Alagözlü, 2019). While IC has advanced to the forefront of modern learning design (Byram & Golubeva, 2020), its pedagogical implementation in higher education remains a complex endeavor (Permatasari, 2023). This challenge is particularly evident in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts such as China. While China's socio-cultural landscape is increasingly diverse, the opportunities for sustained, face-to-face intercultural interaction within traditional classroom settings remain constrained (Peng et al., 2015; Mu & Yu, 2021).

To address these limitations, teachers often facilitate reflective engagement with other cultures through visual media (Tomlinson, 2019). However, translating policy intentions into classroom practice frequently yields superficial results. Practitioners often prioritize linguistic outcomes or navigate around sensitive cultural topics to maintain classroom harmony (Lu et al., 2025). This disconnect highlights a need for locally contextualized pedagogical frameworks that address both learner needs and the conceptual uncertainties faced by teachers (Kulich & Wang, 2015). In the absence of direct contact, mediated environments, specifically television and structured media analysis, can serve as vital tools for simulating intercultural encounters (Corbett, 2022). Although multimodal media offers authentic input and enhanced motivation (Çakır, 2022; Tirnaz & Narafshan, 2018), there is still room to explore how these resources can be utilized in a more structured and systematic manner. Existing research has frequently utilized isolated clips or general films, whereas the potential of sustained viewing, analysis, and interpretation remains an area for further empirical inquiry (Donaghy, 2019). Specifically, the longitudinal use of sitcoms as primary pedagogical vehicles and the ways teachers scaffold discussions around complex themes such as stereotypes and identity warrant deeper investigation, particularly given the central role of teacher agency in shaping these experiences (Lu et al., 2025). More broadly, intercultural competence research in classroom contexts remains underexplored, calling for more studies that closely examine teaching and learning practices in order to understand how classrooms can function as meaningful spaces for IC learning (Al-Afifi et al., 2025).

1.1. Research Objectives

To further explore these pedagogical possibilities, this study investigates the use of *Fresh Off the Boat* (FOTB)—a sitcom portraying migration and identity negotiation—as a primary, sustained learning resource in a Chinese university EFL classroom. Responding to calls for research empirically informed by Byram's (2009) model (Mu & Yu, 2021), this qualitative case study explores how sitcom-based pedagogy supports intercultural teaching and learning from the triangulated perspectives of one experienced teacher and two students. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the teacher's perceptions of the role and challenges of using FOTB to develop students' intercultural competence in the LIC course?

RQ2: What are the students' understandings and experiences of the value, learning process, and difficulties involved in using FOTB for their intercultural learning?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Multimodal Media Use in Developing Intercultural Competence

In language classroom contexts, there is more focus on how instructional materials can be designed and employed to raise learners' intercultural awareness and develop intercultural competence (e.g. Mishan, 2023). Among these materials, films and television series are increasingly recognized as exemplary forms of multimodal media for fostering intercultural competence (IC). Unlike monomodal resources, these audiovisual materials integrate multiple semiotic resources—including spoken language, visual imagery, body language, and soundtracks—to construct complex cultural meanings. These resources not only provide rich cultural input and emotional engagement but also offer contextualised learning environments that enable learners to transcend the cultural limitations often found in traditional textbooks (Tomlinson, 2019). While visual media have been a staple in intercultural education for decades (Chao, 2013; Mendez García & Cores Bilbao, 2023), significant gaps remain regarding their effective implementation. Specifically, further research is required to ensure these tools are used without reinforcing stereotypes or cultural misrepresentations (Glotov, 2022). This concern is increasingly pertinent, as media-based pedagogy demands critical attention to how learners interpret, question, and engage with complex cultural representations.

Existing literature highlights positive attitudinal outcomes associated with media use. For instance, Çakır (2022) observed that Turkish EFL learners developed heightened international awareness following exposure to films and television, while Tirnaz and Narafshan (2018) reported similar findings among Iranian EFL students viewing intercultural advertisements. However, while these studies suggest clear benefits, they tend to conceptualize intercultural competence primarily as awareness or sensitivity, often failing to explore the development of broader, more complex dimensions of competence.

Conversely, other researchers have focused on learning processes. Utilizing learner diaries and interviews, Chao (2013) and Yue (2019) examined how EFL students reflect upon and compare cultures while viewing foreign films. Their findings indicate that media-based learning can effectively stimulate cultural curiosity, interpretation, and reflection. Nevertheless, these studies offer limited insight into the critical influence of classroom design, teacher guidance, and interaction. Similarly, Yang and Fleming (2013) argue that Chinese students interpret audiovisual media in complex ways, deeply influenced by their backgrounds and social experiences. While this offers valuable insight into the learner's experience of media, there remains a lack of empirical understanding regarding how these diverse experiences are transformed into structured intercultural learning. Crucially, few studies have systematically mapped these media-based learning outcomes onto established theoretical frameworks, such as Byram's (2009) IC model. Linking empirical findings to such a model is essential for moving beyond idiosyncratic descriptions of student reactions toward a more rigorous, multidimensional assessment of intercultural growth.

Despite the established history of multimodal media in intercultural education, research remains limited regarding how these tools can support meaningful learning without reinforcing stereotypical representations (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2025). While there is scholarly consensus on the potential value of multimodal media in culturally diverse contexts, it remains unclear how teachers and students collaboratively construct

intercultural meaning, or how students progress from basic awareness towards deeper competence. To address these gaps, this study investigates the use of the American sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat* (FOTB)—a series that specifically navigates the complexities of the Chinese-immigrant experience, identity negotiation, and cultural 'clash'—as a primary pedagogical resource. This sitcom was selected because its narrative structure provides rich, contextualized instances of Byram's (2009) model in action, particularly regarding the development of "critical cultural awareness" and the "skills of interpreting and relating." The research, conducted within an intercultural communication course at a Chinese university, explores how an experienced non-native English teacher and his students perceive the role of the sitcom—and the challenges involved—in developing intercultural competence.

2.2. Theoretical Underpinning

Rooted in foreign language education, Byram's (2009) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) seeks to integrate linguistic proficiency with intercultural dimensions. While the broader framework encompasses communicative elements, this study focuses on its Intercultural Competence (IC) core, which Byram conceptualizes through five interrelated "savoirs." Specifically, the model includes attitudes (*savoir être*) characterized by openness and curiosity; knowledge (*savoirs*) of cultural practices and social identities; and skills divided into interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*) and discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*). At the heart of the model lies critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*), which represents the ability to evaluate cultural perspectives and practices through a rational and explicit lens, ensuring that language teaching serves its broader educational function (Byram, 2009).

This intercultural competence model functions as a comprehensive pedagogical framework that offers pedagogical guidance for shaping intercultural learning objectives in foreign language education, encouraging teachers to deliberately incorporate instructional aims that foreground the development of learners' critical cultural awareness (Ryan, 2012). The development of this awareness ideally depends on opportunities for interaction with people from other cultures. In contexts where such interaction is not feasible, intercultural learning can be supported through simulated or imagined forms of interaction, including virtual exchange, perspective taking and engagement with cultural narratives through carefully designed pedagogical activities (Qin & Holmes, 2022). In this study, this IC model provides a structured analytical lens to examine how students and their instructor engage with intercultural meanings when using *Fresh Off the Boat* (FOTB) as a multimodal media resource in the Language and Intercultural Communication (LIC) course in Chinese EFL classroom. By mapping participants' experiences onto these five dimensions proposed by Byram (2009), the study aims to capture not only what learners understand about culture, but also how they interpret, respond to, and critically reflect on cultural representations.

3. Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to examine the pedagogical integration of the sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat* (FOTB) within a Chinese university EFL classroom. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure a triangulated perspective; the teacher was selected based on his extensive experience in multimodal instruction, while his two students were invited to provide diverse accounts of the

learning process. By focusing on this specific instructional unit, the research captures the complex interplay between pedagogy, learner engagement, and contextual factors (Tran & Nguyen, 2024). This approach facilitates an analysis of how intercultural meaning is negotiated when teacher and students interact with the sitcom's narrative of migration and identity.

The primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews designed to move beyond surface-level responses about the television series. Instead of relying on rigid questioning, the open-ended nature of these interviews allowed participants to first describe specific cinematic moments—such as instances of cultural conflict or humor in FOTB—and subsequently bridge these observations to their own cultural beliefs and the broader theoretical dimensions of Byram's (2009) model. This method enabled the generation of valuable heuristic insights and analytical possibilities, allowing the phenomenon to be illustrated vividly and in a highly contextualized and detailed manner from multiple perspectives (Duff, 2020). In this context, the interviews made it possible to examine how participants interpreted the sitcom, reflected on complex cultural themes, and articulated the nuances of their intercultural growth.

Participants in this study involved one EFL teacher and two student participants (see Table 1). Vincent, an Indian male teacher with extensive experience in language and intercultural communication, facilitates the Language and Intercultural Communication (LIC) course, where *Fresh Off the Boat* has been integrated into the curriculum over multiple semesters. His diverse cultural background and international experience provide him with a unique vantage point to model intercultural mediation, helping him navigate and bridge different cultural frames during classroom discussions. This aligns with the view that an educator's value in intercultural education lies in their ability to function as a "mediator" who can critically reflect on multiple cultural perspectives (Corbett, 2022). The two student participants, Simon and Kelly, are Chinese sophomores enrolled in the LIC course (see Table 1). Both possess intermediate to upper-intermediate English proficiency and have demonstrated a capacity for reflective learning. All participants were recruited from a university in Guangdong Province, China.

Table 1: Profile of Study Participants

Pseudonym	Role	Gender	Background	Course Enrollment	Experience / Proficiency
Vincent	EFL Teacher	Male	Indian	Language and Intercultural Communication (LIC)	10 years of teaching experience in language and intercultural communication
Simon	Student	Male	Chinese	LIC Course (Sophomore)	Intermediate to upper-intermediate English proficiency
Kelly	Student	Female	Chinese	LIC Course (Sophomore)	Intermediate to upper-intermediate English proficiency

Data were elicited through semi-structured interviews with one EFL teacher (Vincent) and two students (Simon and Kelly). Participants were recruited via purposive sampling (Tin & Bui, 2024), selecting individuals whose sustained engagement with the FOTB curriculum ensured high "information power" (Malterud et al., 2016). The teacher

served as a key informant, while students were selected from an open call based on their capacity for detailed reflection. Each 45-minute interview was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and triangulated with teacher observations to ensure a balanced perspective on classroom intercultural negotiation. The analysis adopted a hybrid thematic approach (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) following Creswell and Báez's (2020) systematic procedures. The first phase is inductive. The first author conducted open coding to capture emergent narratives (e.g., "cultural stereotypes"). The second phase is deductive, using Byram's (2009) intercultural dimensions served as sensitizing concepts to refine and cluster codes. This iterative process synthesized data into two overarching themes: (1) enhancement of intercultural competence from teacher and students' perspectives, and (2) perceived challenges in using FOTB for IC development. Throughout, the first author maintained a reflexive journal to monitor personal biases, ensuring the findings faithfully preserved the participants' authentic voices while maintaining sensitivity to cultural nuances.

4. Results

Overall, our findings are structured to reflect the synergistic relationship between pedagogical intent and student experience. The first part examines the teacher's (Vincent) strategic design and his perceptions of the challenges inherent in using *Fresh Off the Boat* (FOTB). The second part addresses RQ2 by finding out Vincent's students Simon and Kelly's self-reported learning trajectories, specifically their perceived value, the internal cognitive processes they navigated, and the difficulties they encountered during their intercultural engagement.

4.1. Enhancement of Intercultural Competence from Teacher and Students' Perspectives

Across the three interviews, *Fresh Off the Boat* (FOTB) emerges as a shared intercultural space where Vincent and his students perceive noticeable growth in intercultural competence, as can be seen in the following themes. All three describe how the sitcom opens emotional and cognitive pathways for understanding cultural differences, interpreting cultural meaning, comparing values, engaging in dialogue, and critically questioning representation. Their stories, which are interwoven across different voices, portray the sitcom not as passive entertainment, but as an active catalyst for intercultural development.

4.1.1. Growing Curiosity, Openness, and Willingness to Engage with Cultural Difference

Vincent consistently observes a shift in students' attitudes when working with the sitcom. He notes that humor "*helps students explore Chinese-American culture through humor and relatable scenarios,*" creating an atmosphere of "*shared laughter and reflection*" that lowers anxiety and opens students up to cultural difference.

Kelly's response mirrors this sense of emotional openness. She recalls the moment she learned a sitcom would be the core course material: "*I genuinely felt a bit surprised... it's my first experience to learn something by looking into a TV show... and it indeed is a useful tool.*" Instead of resistance, she quickly found the experience "*chill and entertaining,*" and this enjoyment fueled a deeper interest in immigrant culture—how Chinese Americans speak, how they blend Chinese and American traditions, and how they negotiate identity abroad.

Simon echoes this attitudinal shift but adds a layer of longing and vulnerability. Watching FOTB intensified his existing fascination with American culture: *“I have gained more insights into Chinese American culture and have become more curious and yearning for it.”* Even discomfort—such as encountering stereotypes in the show—functions as a productive emotional trigger for curiosity rather than rejection. Simon admits, *“Some plots make a Chinese uncomfortable,”* yet he treats this discomfort as a pathway into deeper intercultural reflection. Together, their voices show how the sitcom cultivates a foundational attitudinal readiness—curiosity, openness, and willingness to sit with cultural tension.

4.1.2. Deepening Understanding of Cultural Norms, Values, and Lived Realities

Across participants, the sitcom provides vivid, concrete cultural knowledge that textbooks alone could not supply. Vincent purposefully designs the course around scenes that *“highlight cultural clashes, generational gaps, and holiday celebrations,”* making cultural norms *“visible and relatable”* for students.

Kelly picks up on these nuances immediately. She notes how Jewish and Chinese values appear in Eddie and Philip’s interaction: *“Philip uses a more well-mannered and polite way... Eddie is more natural and hospitable... Jessica involved Philip into a big family group because of collectivism.”* She also identifies high-context communication in Jessica’s indirect conflict with her sister: *“They pretend speaking in a kind way to show their actual meaning... this is the high-context communication feature of Chinese culture.”*

Simon, meanwhile, gravitates toward broader sociocultural realities. He interprets Eddie’s lunchbox discrimination scene as a clash of cultural norms and power: *“The headmaster’s approach is a kind of discrimination... Eddie’s mom Jessica taking the school to court is a sign of courage to protect Asians’ rights.”* He also articulates the collectivism behind the Huangs’ decision to move: *“The whole family moved to Orlando... typical in Chinese families to pursue collective interests.”* What emerges from both students is not superficial cultural noticing but layered, theory-informed understanding—precisely the kind of cultural knowledge Vincent intends to cultivate.

4.1.3. Developing the Ability to Interpret Cultural Meanings and Relate Them to One’s Own Life

All three participants describe how FOTB stimulates comparison between on-screen and real-life cultural experiences. Vincent deliberately encourages these parallels by asking questions such as, *“How might your family react in this situation?”* prompting students to interpret cultural motivations and map them onto their own lives.

Kelly demonstrates this interpretive work in her analysis of restaurant scenes and lunchbox conflicts: *“We can know there is a strong misunderstanding of Chinese cuisine... Compared to them, I feel our own culture is more chill and respectful to other cultures’ food.”*

Simon, too, draws comparisons, especially around identity. Observing Eddie’s attraction to hip-hop culture, he notes: *“It is a manifestation of his attempt to fit into the American classmate circle... But in China, students make friends without racial anxieties.”*

Both students also begin to step into the shoes of the characters, imagining how they themselves might respond in similar situations. For example, Kelly reflects that *“If I were Eddie... I’d understand her behavior from my Chinese identity, but I’d also talk to her if I felt discomfort.”* By placing herself inside the scene, she shows an ability to empathize with Jessica’s strictness while still acknowledging her own emotional boundaries. Similarly, Simon engages in a similar form of perspective-taking. He explains that *“If I were Jessica... I’d be uncomfortable with the number four, but I wouldn’t be at odds with money.”* In doing so, he not only empathizes with Jessica’s cultural beliefs but also questions the exaggeration portrayed in the sitcom, blending critical awareness with imaginative interpretation. These interpretive reflections illustrate students’ growing ability to decenter, compare perspectives, and reason about cultural motivations—skills central to intercultural competence.

4.1.4. Strengthening Interactional and Discovery Skills Through Classroom Dialogue

Enhanced intercultural competence is also evident in how students describe learning through classroom discourse. Vincent intentionally structures lessons through brainstorming, group discussion, and peer-critique sessions, giving students opportunities to note cultural insights or biases” in each other’s interpretations. Under such designed teaching styles, Kelly values this interactive design, explaining: *“I can freely talk out my opinion... and I really appreciate his teaching way.”* In addition, writing tasks that link directly to FOTB also help her *“realize some culture terms’ meanings”*—suggesting that meaning emerges through explanation, not just viewing. In the same vein, Simon provides an even clearer picture of how interaction builds competence: *“After watching two to three episodes, there are regular group discussions... which deepen our comparative understanding.”* *“Through guiding questions... I clearly know where intercultural phenomena exist.”* His description shows how teacher scaffolding and peer negotiation support real-time discovery and intercultural articulation.

4.1.5. Growing Critical Awareness of Stereotypes and Media Representation

Finally, all three participants identify noticeable growth in students’ capacity to critique cultural portrayals. Vincent intentionally foregrounds stereotype analysis to help students distinguish exaggeration from reality: *“We analyze whether portrayals exaggerate or reflect real cultural truths... This helps students distinguish media stereotypes from reality.”*

Both Kelly and Simon pick up this critical lens. Kelly questions exaggeration in scenes depicting superstition: *“Louis’s reactions are really exaggerated... like a stereotype of Chinese people being superstitious... not everyone is like this.”* She also critiques Jessica’s “tiger mom” portrayal as *“kinda like a stereotype”*—yet understandable as a narrative device. Simon takes this further by expressing concern about how these portrayals might shape outsiders’ views: *“The portrayal was exaggerated and extreme... risks reinforcing foreigners’ stereotypical views.”* He even articulates strategies for responding to stereotypes in real intercultural encounters, such as using personal anecdotes or factual information to challenge misconceptions.

4.2. Perceived Challenges in Using FOTB for IC Development

Although the teacher and his students recognised Fresh Off the Boat (FOTB) as a rich intercultural resource, their accounts also reveal a shared awareness that the sitcom brings distinctive challenges into the learning process.

4.2.1. Linguistic Complexity and the Burden of Authenticity

The primary obstacle identified across the accounts is the significant linguistic demand imposed by the sitcom's authentic nature. Vincent is candid about the persistent difficulty of ensuring that students actually watch the episodes consistently, noting that without this sustained engagement, the depth of intercultural discussion is severely compromised. Even when students are prepared, he observes that they frequently "*struggle with unfamiliar slang or cultural references,*" which forces him to pause and clarify vocabulary rather than focusing solely on cultural analysis. These linguistic hurdles are felt acutely by the students; Simon admits that the dialogue is often too fast and filled with "*native American expressions*" that are nearly impossible to decode without Chinese subtitles. This shared concern suggests that while the "*authentic*" language of a sitcom is a draw, it simultaneously creates a high cognitive barrier that can frustrate the learning process if not carefully managed.

4.2.2. Schematic Gaps and the Subtlety of Cultural Cues

Beyond the literal language, the findings reveal a profound challenge in bridging the gap between the sitcom's implicit cultural messages and the learners' existing knowledge. Vincent recognizes that much of the intercultural meaning is embedded in humor and subtle social cues, which he must deliberately scaffold to prevent misunderstanding. Kelly's reflections confirm this difficulty, as she explains that because the plots do not explicitly define "*culture terms,*" her different background makes it hard to "*realize*" or relate to the underlying values. She finds that the implicitness of the medium slows her understanding, leaving her unsure of the deeper messages within a character's gestures or tone. Simon further illustrates this schematic gap by describing his confusion over specific cultural emblems, such as the cowboy-themed restaurant; he realized he lacked the necessary historical and geographical knowledge of the American West to interpret the scene's significance. Both students therefore underscore the same reality: exposure to the sitcom reveals what they don't know, creating a "*missing link*" that only structured instruction can provide.

4.2.3. The Necessity of Pedagogical Mediation and Emotional Scaffolding

The final challenge involves the complex task of transforming raw media exposure into a structured and emotionally safe learning experience. Vincent emphasizes that his role extends beyond translation to "*emotional navigation*"; he anticipates moments where students might feel uncomfortable with stereotypical portrayals of Chinese culture and prepares strategies to "*turn discomfort into a learning opportunity*" by providing historical context. This need for active mediation is explicitly echoed by the students, who both feel that watching alone is insufficient for intercultural growth. Kelly expresses a clear desire for the teacher to "*firstly tell us the cultural background*" before viewing to reduce the initial confusion. Similarly, Simon proposes that the class should "*watch one episode together and discuss it afterward,*" arguing that interacting with the teacher is the only way to uncover the "*hidden cultural terms*" that students might otherwise miss.

Collectively, their voices suggest that the sitcom's power as an IC tool is not inherent in the video itself, but is unlocked through the teacher's ability to contextualize and mediate the experience.

5. Discussion & Implications

In contexts where direct intercultural interaction is constrained, mediated cultural contact—specifically through the targeted integration of media—serves as a powerful mechanism for learners to observe and critically evaluate diverse cultural behaviors (Corbett, 2022). Our findings demonstrate that *Fresh Off the Boat* (FOTB) functions as a meaningful intercultural learning resource when coupled with deliberate pedagogical scaffolding. The combined narratives of the teacher and students reveal a shared developmental trajectory characterized by increased openness, richer cultural knowledge, and improved confidence in intercultural communication.

While Byram's (2009) dimensions provide a foundational analytical lens, the data suggests that these competencies often function as an integrated whole rather than in isolation. In this sitcom-based context, learners' development did not merely align with specific categories; instead, it demonstrated a fluid overlap where, for instance, the acquisition of new cultural knowledge (*savoirs*) was inextricably linked to the shifts in learners' attitudes (*savoir être*) and interpretive skills. By mapping the findings onto this established framework, the study does not seek a rigid one-to-one correspondence; rather, it utilizes the model as a heuristic tool to systematically categorize the multifaceted ways in which students navigated cultural complexity, while acknowledging that these themes often emerged in a non-linear, bottom-up manner.

The case findings illustrate this integrated process vividly. Kelly's shift from passive viewing to active reflection, driven by peer interaction, demonstrates that intercultural meaning is co-constructed (Kohler, 2020), shifting away from passive content reception toward a more dynamic curriculum design (Mickan & Wallace, 2020). Similarly, Simon's analytical growth reflects a developing ability to navigate complex meaning systems (Baker, 2024) while simultaneously cultivating intercultural empathy (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2025). Collectively, these results mark a crucial shift from "learning about culture" to "learning through cultural engagement," where the affective elements of conflict and humor enhance personal relevance. This engagement aligns with Corbett's (2022) view of intercultural meaning-making as a negotiated and relational process, addressing concerns that traditional materials often oversimplify cultural realities (Boumechaal, 2025; Mishan & Kiss, 2024).

Crucially, this multidimensional development was facilitated by the teacher's intentional pedagogical interventions, which served as the pivotal factor in bridging the gap between raw media exposure and critical meaning-making. Guided discussions and questioning strategies created the necessary space for students to interrogate cultural representations and navigate the inherent uncertainty of intercultural learning (Mishan & Kiss, 2024). This role becomes even more vital when considering the limitations of authentic media; learners frequently faced linguistic barriers—such as slang and rapid speech—and deficits in cultural background knowledge, which occasionally prioritized linguistic decoding over deeper interpretation. Furthermore, scenes involving identity conflicts often provoked emotional discomfort (Mu & Yu, 2021). These challenges highlight the dual-edged nature of authenticity: while FOTB provides a rich context, it risks overwhelming learners unless the teacher provides sufficient scaffolding to

transform potential frustration into structured reflection. It should be noted, however, that these promising outcomes are based on self-reported data, reflecting the participants' perceptions of their own growth rather than measured performance. While these subjective accounts offer deep pedagogical insights into the *process* of intercultural development, they underscore the need for sustained teacher guidance to ensure that such perceived gains translate into functional intercultural competence in diverse real-world settings.

Based on the findings of this study, several pedagogical implications can be drawn for EFL practitioners and curriculum designers: First, instructors should adopt a "strategic clipping" approach rather than "full-episode exposure" when utilizing multimodal media. Specifically, priority should be given to "culturally dense" segments—those depicting cultural conflict, identity negotiation, or misunderstandings—to serve as anchors for classroom discussion. By critically curating materials in this manner, teachers can prevent cognitive fatigue and ensure that instructional time is focused on the most analytically productive content. Second, intercultural teaching must shift from "knowledge transmission" toward "inquiry-based guidance." Realizing the full instructional potential of sitcoms necessitates move beyond passive exposure. Teachers should employ open-ended, inquiry-based questioning to guide students beyond surface-level linguistic decoding toward the critical evaluation of cultural representations. This allows learners to connect narrative depictions with their own lived cultural experiences, effectively aligning with the higher-order dimensions of Byram's model. Third, curriculum design should focus on constructing a "dynamic instructional environment" to stimulate learner agency. This design should encourage students to co-construct cultural meaning through collaborative interpretation and collective discussion. By transforming students from passive recipients into active participants in knowledge creation, educators can better prepare them for authentic and sustained language use in the real world. Fourth, practitioners must cultivate "emotionally safe spaces" to navigate the complexities of cultural representation. When encountering audiovisual materials involving stereotypes or sensitive identity conflicts, instructors should not avoid student discomfort. Instead, they should proactively manage emotional tension by providing historical and generational contexts, thereby transforming moments of potential frustration into opportunities for ethical and critical reflection.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated the pedagogical integration of the sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat* to support intercultural competence (IC) development in a Chinese university EFL context. The findings demonstrate that targeted use of multimodal narrative media, when supported by structured teacher mediation, leads to significant growth in learners' cultural knowledge, interpretive abilities, and critical cultural awareness. While the study is limited by its single-institution context and reliance on self-reported data, it offers a replicable and scalable instructional pathway for fostering a more reflective, dialogic, and ethically grounded intercultural learning ecology. Ultimately, this research confirms that the pedagogical value of sitcoms lies not in passive exposure, but in their capacity to serve as a catalyst for critical inquiry and the co-construction of intercultural meaning.

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

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