Impact of Multicultural Literature on Intercultural Communicative Competence Development in English Language Education: A Systematic Review

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Abstract. This systematic literature review investigates the impact of integrating multicultural literature (ML) on the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) language education. Following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, the review examined literature published from 2013 to 2023, analyzing the benefits, and challenges in using ML to enhance ICC in language education. 16 articles were selected based on predetermined screening criteria. The analysis identified four main themes: student engagement and attitudes, development of intercultural awareness and critical thinking, enhancement of language proficiency, and the role of teachers and pedagogical strategies. ML was found to significantly enhance students' ICC by exposing them to diverse cultural narratives, fostering critical thinking, empathy, and open-mindedness. However, challenges such as limited availability of multicultural texts, teacher preparedness and training, assessment and evaluation difficulties, and cultural sensitivity and ethical concerns were identified. Addressing these challenges was crucial to maximizing the benefits of ML for ICC development in language education. This study provided a comprehensive overview of current research on ML in EFL/ESL education, offering insights for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers to enhance intercultural competence through effective integration of multicultural literature. Future research directions were also discussed to guide further exploration in this critical area.

Keywords: EFL/ESL education; intercultural communicative competence; language proficiency; multicultural literature; teacher training

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1. Introduction

The development of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) has gained significant attention globally due to its critical role in facilitating effective and respectful communication in increasingly multicultural and interconnected societies. In today's globalized world, the ability to communicate across cultural boundaries is essential for both personal and professional interactions, making ICC a vital skill for foreign language learners (Alqefari, 2019; Brdarić, 2016; Byram, 2015; Gu & Zhao, 2021; Safa & Tofighi, 2022). ICC involves not only linguistic proficiency but also the ability to understand, appreciate, and navigate different cultural contexts, thereby promoting mutual respect and reducing ethnocentrism (Byram, 2020). For foreign language learners, acquiring ICC is particularly important as it enhances their ability to engage meaningfully with speakers from diverse backgrounds, enriching their overall learning experience and broadening their global perspectives (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019; Tran & Duong, 2022). One effective way to foster ICC is through the use of multicultural literature (ML) in language education, which provides authentic cultural insights and diverse perspectives (Gómez Rodríguez, 2013; Rey Montaño, 2022; Young, 2019).

ML serves as a valuable tool for promoting cultural awareness, empathy, and understanding, thereby enhancing ICC in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) education. ML encompasses literary works that reflect the experiences, perspectives, and cultural heritage of diverse ethnic and cultural groups (Slaughter, 2021). Mandarani and Munir (2021) emphasize that ML texts provide authentic portrayals of various cultures, enabling learners to develop a deeper understanding of different societies and their values. Exposure to ML helps students gain insights into diverse cultural perspectives, social norms, and practices, thereby enhancing their cultural awareness and sensitivity during reading process (Casto, 2020). Watkins and Noble (2021) argue that exploring characters and narratives from diverse cultural backgrounds allows learners to develop a nuanced understanding of the complexities of human experiences. The integration of ML into language learning not only enriches students' cultural knowledge but also equips them to better navigate and understand the multicultural world, thereby significantly enhancing their ICC.

Despite extensive research on ICC development in foreign language teaching, scholars highlight significant challenges in incorporating ML into language learning contexts (Bapir et al., 2023; Hayroyan & Mkhitaryan, 2021; Hoff, 2019; Neely, 2022; Sleeter, 2018). Reading plays a crucial role in language education as it allows learners to engage deeply with cultural narratives and perspectives embedded in literature. However, traditional EFL reading instruction often focuses on basic language structures, vocabulary acquisition, and literal comprehension, potentially overlooking the cognitive skills and cultural sensitivity needed for engaging with diverse texts (Hoff, 2019). Furthermore, effective utilization of ML in EFL educational contexts requires careful selection of high-quality literature and access to authentic, culturally relevant materials to promote both language learning and intercultural competence. Additionally,

Neely (2022) highlighted that many teachers may lack the necessary knowledge, skills, and resources to effectively incorporate ML into their teaching practices. These challenges highlight the complexities involved in leveraging ML to enhance ICC within language education settings.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive understanding of the benefits and potential drawbacks of using ML in EFL/ESL education. By conducting a systematic review of existing literature, this study aims to shed light on the benefits of ML for ICC development, explore the challenges associated with its use, and identify avenues for future research in this important area. Through this analysis, we hope to contribute to the impact of ML on ICC development in EFL/ESL educational settings. Specifically, the study endeavored to answer the following research questions:

   i.   What are the benefits of ML for the development of ICC in EFL/ESL education?
   ii. What challenges hinder the use of ML to promote the development of ICC in EFL/ESL education?

2. Methodology

This study employed a systematic review method. This method is scientific in gathering insights into a specific research domain while aiding future studies to identify gaps and trends in previous and current studies (Majid & Salam, 2021). The methodology employed in this systematic review adheres to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines proposed by Moher et al. (2015), ensuring a rigorous and transparent approach to synthesize and analyze the available literature. Through this standard, this review outlined the eligibility criteria, information sources, data-collection processes, data items, and synthesis of the results to provide insightful answers to the research questions. For example, the review focused on publications from recognized and reputable journals to explore the impact of ML on the development of ICC in EFL/ESL educational contexts. Key aspects examined included improvements in ICC among participants exposed to ML and the benefits and challenges associated with integrating ML into English language learning environments.

2.1 Selection of Criteria

Three pivotal databases were selected to serve as information-searching resources for this systematic review. The first two databases, Scopus and ProQuest, were chosen for their extensive coverage, rigorous indexing standards, advanced search capabilities, and strict quality control measures, making them prominent databases in the academic sphere (Samsuddin & Aspura, 2021). Notably, Scopus indexes over 80 million records, while ProQuest encompasses a vast repository of scholarly literature, comprising millions of records across various disciplines. This comprehensive approach ensures a thorough examination of the available literature, enhancing the robustness and reliability of the systematic review findings (Gusenbauer & Haddaway, 2020). The third database selected in this systematic review was Google Scholar, recognized as the most comprehensive academic search engine presently available, indexing nearly 400 million records

(Gusenbauer, 2019). Most importantly, Google Scholar's inclusion helps mitigate potential publication bias, as it encompasses a broad spectrum of literature, including grey literature and articles not formally published within leading databases (Gusenbauer & Haddaway, 2020).

2.2 Systematic Review Process
2.2.1 Identification
The first phase in this review was the identification phase, performed in January 2024. The search for relevant literature encompassed several prominent and discipline-specific databases chosen to ensure a comprehensive retrieval of scholarly publications pertaining to intercultural communicative competence (ICC), multicultural literature (some authors specifically refer to the literary texts), and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching. The process involved keyword identification for information-searching purposes. These keywords were then converted into search strings used in both databases to identify relevant articles for this review. Table 1 summarizes these search strings.

Table 1: Search strings for the identification stage of the review

Databases	Search string
Scopus	(ALL (multicultural and literary) AND ALL (intercultural and communicative and competencies) AND ALL (efl) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (literary and text)) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "ar"))
ProQuest	(multicultural literature) AND noft (literary text) AND (intercultural communicative competence) AND noft (EFL or ESL)
Google Scholar	multicultural literature or literary texts and intercultural communicative competence and EFL or ESL "intercultural communicative competence (ICC)"

2.2.2 Screening (inclusion and exclusion criteria)
The selection of studies for this systematic review followed predetermined criteria aimed at ensuring the relevance and quality of the included literature. The screening process was conducted to establish the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the articles considered in this review. Criteria were applied as follows: The first criterion was the Year of Publication: Studies from 2013 to 2023 were considered, allowing for the collection of recent findings within the past decade to ensure the incorporation of up-to-date research. The second criterion was the language, in which only studies published in English were included in this review to prevent the need for translation that might lead to misinterpretation. The third criterion was document type, in which only journal articles with empirical data were selected for this review. The fourth criterion was respondents, and only studies with students as participants were selected, focusing on student-centered research to specifically measure the direct impact of ML on students' ICC in English language contexts. The fifth criterion was the context of studies, where studies conducted in educational settings or specific EFL/ESL-related contexts were considered, ensuring relevance to EFL/ESL education and ML's impact on ICC development. The sixth criterion was teaching materials: studies focusing on ML or literary texts were included, while those centered on textbooks or other

learning materials were excluded. Finally, the seventh criterion involved evaluation methods, where studies employing experimental designs with tests or specific instruments to measure improvements in ICC after utilizing ML were included. Studies based solely on subjective perceptions without experimental data were excluded. After outlining these criteria, Table 2 below provides a summary:

Table 2: Inclusion and exclusion criteria for the study

| Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Year of publication	2013 to 2023	2012 and earlier
Language	English	Non-English
Document type	Journal articles with empirical data	Conference proceedings, chapters in a book, book series, book reviews, books, etc.
Respondents	Students	Teachers or other participant groups
Context of studies	In EFL/ESL educational context	Training or unrelated to language education
Materials	Multicultural literature or literary texts	Textbooks or other learning materials
Evaluation methods	studies with test scores or specific instruments to measure the improvements in ICC after the use of ML	Studies that are perception based without any experiments

2.2.3 Eligibility

In the initial phase, a comprehensive search of the Scopus (11), ProQuest (16), and Google Scholar (317) databases yielded 344 documents matching the search string detailed in Table 1. Duplication between databases resulted in the exclusion of 32 documents, reducing the document library to 312 documents for further evaluation. A subsequent review removed 16 documents not published in English, reducing to 296 documents for subsequent stages. Further refinement focused on documents that lacked complete empirical data or were not presented as complete journal articles, resulting in the exclusion of 38 documents. This step narrowed the selection to 258 documents for careful review. Within this set of articles, 135 articles were excluded due to a lack of student respondents, consistent with the review focusing on student-centred findings in an EFL/ESL educational context. Of the remaining 123 articles, the strategic review process excluded 30 articles that focused on student study abroad training, as these were outside the scope of ESL/EFL language education settings. Subsequent exclusion criteria led to the rejection of 44 articles that did not incorporate multicultural texts in their teaching materials, resulting in a final selection of 49 articles in the screening stage. In the final stage, 33 articles reporting perception-based research without empirical support were excluded from the review. Table 3 summarizes the iterative selection process that resulted in articles eligible for inclusion in this comprehensive review. The review focused strictly on articles demonstrating test scores or specific tools that measured respondents' ICC development following their use of ML, resulting in a selection of 16 articles.

Table 3: The screening process for the eligible articles for this review

Exclusion criteria	Excluded articles	Remaining articles
Duplication between databases	32	312 (from the initial 344 articles)
Documents that are not in the English language	16	296
Documents that are not full journal articles	38	258
Articles on studies that did not count students as their respondents	135	123
Articles on studies that were not conducted within the context of EFL/ESL educational settings	30	93
Articles on studies that used materials lacking multicultural texts	44	49
Articles on studies that did not have test scores or specific instruments to engage their respondents' ICC development	33	16 (the final number of articles to be reviewed)

Figure 1 below summarizes the methodology of the study, providing a visual representation of the methodological process from initial data identification to the final selection of eligible articles.
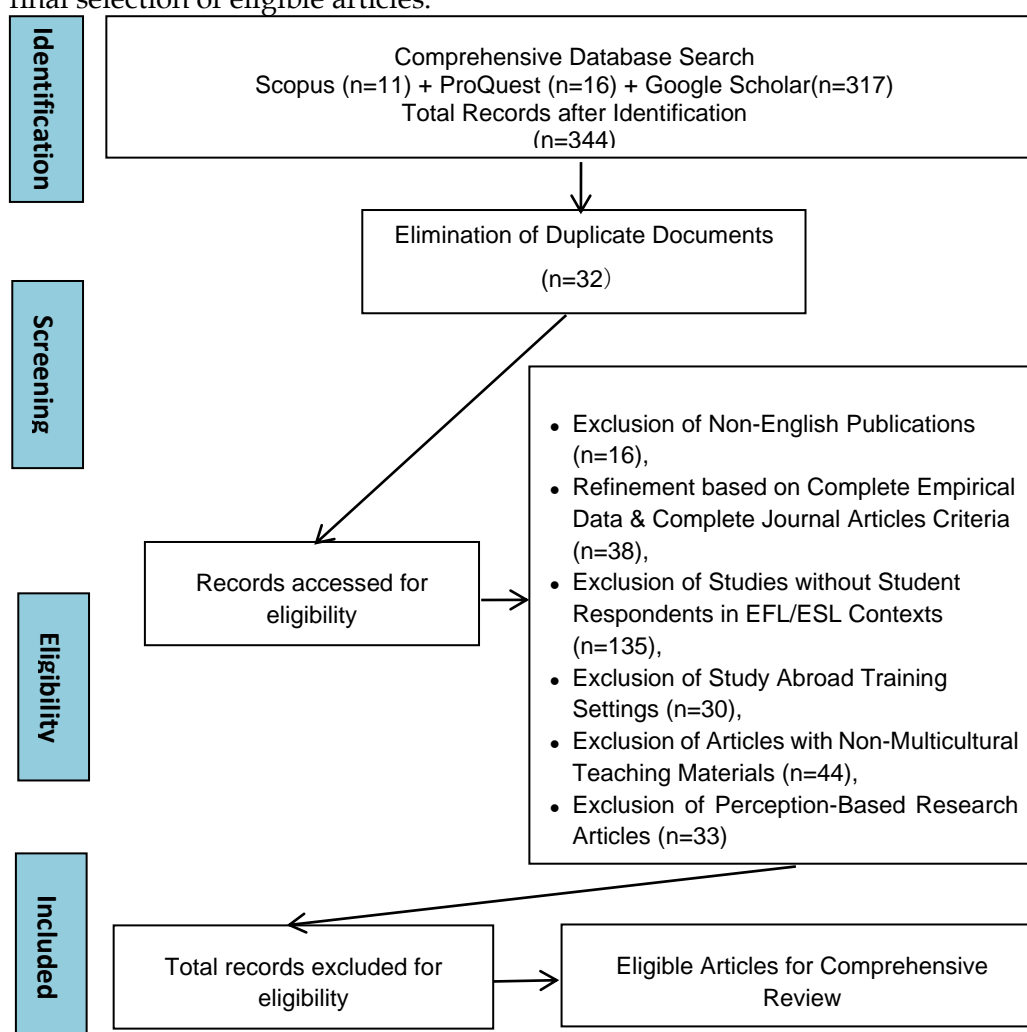
Figure 1: Methodology of the study

3. Results

The following sections provide an in-depth analysis of the various aspects investigated in this review, offering insights into the role of ML in promoting ICC in EFL/ESL settings.

3.1 Country and Respondents

The studies in this review originate from diverse regions globally, including Asia, Europe, and other parts of the world. This global distribution highlights widespread interest in exploring the impact of ML on ICC within EFL/ESL educational contexts. The reviewed literature spans 12 countries, each contributing unique perspectives and insights. These nations include South Korea (Young, 2019), Iraq (with 2 studies) (Bapir et al., 2023; Hussam, 2021) Indonesia (with two studies) (Juliastuti et al., 2023; Permatasari & Andriyanti, 2021), Vietnam (Tran & Seepho, 2016), Thailand (Feeney & Gajaseni, 2020), Armenia (Hayroyan & Mkhitaryan, 2021), and Colombia (with two studies) (Gómez Rodríguez, 2013, 2014), Iran (with two studies) (Birjandy & Khatib, 2018; Rezaei & Naghibian, 2018), Algeria (Bagui & Zohra, 2020), Morocco (Ousiali et al., 2023), China (Ting & Ping, 2019) and Mexico (Sokolova, 2015).

The majority of the reviewed studies primarily involved undergraduate students in EFL/ESL educational environments, with additional focus on middle and high school students. Among the 16 studies, 14 predominantly targeted undergraduate students. One study specifically engaged middle school students, particularly those in grade 7 (Feeney & Gajaseni, 2020), while another centred on high school learners (Ousiali et al., 2023).

3.2 Texts Selection and Teaching Approaches

The analysis of texts selection and teaching methodologies revealed a diverse range of approaches, with a predominant focus on short stories as primary samples. Among the sixteen studies reviewed, eight studies focused primarily on the genre of short stories (Birjandy & Khatib, 2018; Feeney & Gajaseni, 2020; Gómez Rodríguez, 2014; Hayroyan & Mkhitaryan, 2021; Hussam, 2021; Ousiali et al., 2023; Rezaei & Naghibian, 2018; Sokolova, 2015). However, the literary genre employed in the remaining studies was not specified, indicating a wider range of literary material used. As for the teaching approaches, seven studies clearly outlined the methods employed, demonstrating a diverse spectrum. Specifically, three studies focused on literature-based communication (Bapir et al., 2023; Juliastuti et al., 2023; Permatasari & Andriyanti, 2021), one employed a social-constructivist approach (Hayroyan & Mkhitaryan, 2021), another explored Interaction of Contact Zones and Engagement in Debate (Gómez Rodríguez, 2013), and one study emphasized the Relational Teaching (Gómez Rodríguez, 2014) and one adopted Communicative Language Teaching approaches (Bagui & Zohra, 2020). The remaining nine studies did not specify particular teaching methods but provided detailed descriptions of the teaching process.

3.3 Research Design

This review encompassed a variety of research designs, reflecting the methodological diversity in investigating the impact of ML on ICC development.

Four studies employed action research methodologies, which involve a hands-on and iterative approach to studying the impact of ML on ICC development (Gómez Rodríguez, 2013, 2014; Permatasari & Andriyanti, 2021; Young, 2019). Five studies utilized quantitative research methodologies (Bagui & Zohra, 2020; Bapir et al., 2023; Ousiali et al., 2023; Sokolova, 2015; Ting & Ping, 2019), while three studies relied solely on qualitative research methodologies (Birjandy & Khatib, 2018; Hayroyan & Mkhitaryan, 2021; Rezaei & Naghibian, 2018). Additionally, four studies adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies (Birjandy & Khatib, 2018; Hayroyan & Mkhitaryan, 2021; Rezaei & Naghibian, 2018).

3.4 Data Collection Methods and Tools

This review examined a range of data collection methods and tools employed across the studies, including action research, quantitative research, qualitative research, and mixed-methods approaches. The tools used in these studies included questionnaires, interviews, classroom observations, language tests, and intercultural competence assessments. These diverse tools provided distinct insights into the relationship between ML and the development of ICC within educational settings.

Four studies utilized action research, with two employing multiple cycles of classroom observations and interviews to assess how ML influenced ICC (Permatasari & Andriyanti, 2021; Young, 2019). These iterative cycles closely observed classroom dynamics and provided in-depth qualitative data on the impact of ML. Additionally, two studies conducted within university-level language courses explored the impact of ML on ICC development using classroom observations and interviews (Gómez Rodríguez, 2013, 2014).

Five studies adopted quantitative methods, with three primarily using questionnaires to collect data on ICC development (Bapir et al., 2023; Bagui & Zohra, 2020; Sokolova, 2015). One study employed experimental methods that utilized statistical analysis tools such as SPSS (edition 26) to assess changes in ICC after ML exposure (Ousiali et al., 2023). Another study used the Assessment Scale of ICC and performed statistical analyses, including Pearson's Correlation, to analyze the data (Ting & Ping, 2019).

Three studies exclusively relied on qualitative methods. One study used a case study approach to explore how ML influences ICC (Hayroyan & Mkhitaryan, 2021). Another study collected qualitative insights through journal entries and semi-structured interviews (Rezaei & Naghibian, 2018), while a third study employed classroom observations as the primary method to investigate ICC development (Birjandy & Khatib, 2018).

Four studies employed mixed-methods approaches, combining both quantitative and qualitative tools. For example, one study used a combination of questionnaires, language tests, intercultural competence tests, and semi-structured group interviews to comprehensively examine ICC development (Tran & Seepho, 2016). Another study integrated pre- and post-tests with semi-

structured interviews (Feeney & Gajaseni, 2020), while a third combined questionnaires with semi-structured interview questions (Hussam, 2021). The fourth study integrated questionnaires for quantitative data with observations of students' performances for qualitative insights (Ousiali et al., 2023).

3.5 Benefits of ML for ICC Development in EFL/ESL Education
ML contributes significantly to ICC development by engaging students with diverse cultural perspectives and enhancing their language skills. The following four themes emerged from the qualitative analysis of these studies:

Positive Engagement and Attitudes: This theme examined students' involvement and perceptions toward ML-based learning activities. Across the studies, students demonstrated a high level of engagement and positive attitudes towards ML-based learning activities. They expressed enjoyment and appreciation for the opportunity to explore diverse cultural perspectives through literary texts, as highlighted in studies such as Gómez Rodríguez (2013) and Sokolova (2015). Gómez Rodríguez (2013) revealed learners' positive responses and great motivation toward reading literary texts, while Sokolova (2015) discussed Mexican university students' enthusiasm for exploring North American culture through Chicano literature. These findings suggested a promising avenue for improving ICC through student engagement with ML, emphasizing its potential impact on language teaching contexts.

Development of Intercultural Awareness and Critical Thinking: This theme focused on how engagement with ML fosters intercultural understanding and critical thinking skills among students. Engagement with ML fosters the development of intercultural understanding and sensitivity among students, as evidenced by studies like Hayroyan and Mkhitaryan (2021) and Hussam (2021). Hayroyan and Mkhitaryan (2021) discussed how learners developed critical intercultural skills through reading literary short stories, while Hussam (Hussam, 2021) showed how Iranian learners enhanced analysis, interpretation, and critical thinking skills through an intercultural communicative language course. Ousiali et al. (2023) demonstrated how learners enhanced analysis, interpretation, and critical thinking skills through an experiment in a Moroccan high school. These findings underscore the value of using ML to promote critical intercultural skills among students, highlighting its relevance in cultivating a deeper understanding of cultural diversity within educational settings.

Enhancement of Language Proficiency: This theme emphasized how the integration of ML contributes to improving students' language skills, particularly in areas such as oral communication, reading comprehension, and writing. Qualitative data suggested that the integration of ML enhances students' language proficiency, particularly in oral communication, reading comprehension and writing. Examples from studies like Permatasari and Andriyanti (2021) and Birjandy and Khatib (2018) demonstrated how ML contributed to the development of language proficiency alongside intercultural competence. Permatasari and Andriyanti (2021) demonstrated improved English skills among students through activities such as answering questions, discussing

language and cultural elements, and engaging with the content of texts, which in turn shapes their critical thinking. Similarly, Birjandy and Khatib (2018) conducted a content analysis of students' writing assignments, finding a significant engagement with ICC factors while reading, discussing, and contemplating literary texts and their cultural content. Students reported that tasks and materials effectively enhanced their cultural understanding, indicating a fruitful integration of ML into language learning. These findings suggested that integrating ML can be beneficial for language learning outcomes and ICC development among students, highlighting its potential to enhance both linguistic and intercultural competencies.

Effective Pedagogical Strategies: This theme explored the significance of educators in facilitating effective ML-based learning experiences and the strategies they employ to promote intercultural understanding among students. Qualitative findings underscored the importance of teachers' roles and pedagogical strategies in facilitating ML-based intercultural learning experiences. Teachers play a critical role in creating a supportive learning environment, guiding students through meaningful discussions, and addressing cultural misconceptions and biases. Hayroyan and Mkhitaryan (2021) proposed three social constructionist teaching approaches to develop ICC through multicultural literary texts. Bagui and Zohra (2020) scrutinized teaching techniques and strategies to integrate cultural teachings via literary texts, fostering tolerance and empathy with speakers' target language, identity, and culture. Ousiali et al. (2023) highlighted the need for educators and syllabus designers to reconsider integrating literature effectively within EFL classrooms. These findings highlighted the crucial role of teachers in facilitating effective ML-based learning experiences and promoting ICC development among students, underscoring the importance of educator involvement in enhancing intercultural competence within language education.

3.6 Challenges of Using ML in EFL/ESL Education for ICC Development
Despite the benefits, the qualitative analysis of the selected studies has revealed several challenges associated with the use of ML for developing ICC in EFL/ESL education. These challenges can be categorized into four overarching themes: limited availability of multicultural texts, cultural sensitivity and ethical concerns, assessment and evaluation difficulties, and teacher preparedness and training. Understanding these challenges is crucial for improving the integration of ML in language education.

Limited Availability of Multicultural Texts: Accessing diverse and suitable ML texts that align with educational goals and student needs remains a significant challenge. Several studies, such as those by Permatasari and Andriyanti (2021) and Sokolova (2015), highlighted the difficulty in sourcing diverse and appropriate multicultural texts that align with curricular goals and student needs. This limitation restricts the exposure of students to a variety of cultural perspectives, thereby impacting the effectiveness of ML in developing ICC.

Cultural Sensitivity and Ethical Concerns: Educators must navigate the delicate task of discussing potentially sensitive cultural topics without reinforcing stereotypes or offending students. Studies like Hayroyan and Mkhitaryan (2021) highlighted the need for careful selection and presentation of multicultural texts to avoid cultural insensitivity. Teachers must be adept at handling these issues to create an inclusive and respectful learning environment.

Assessment and Evaluation Difficulties: Assessing and evaluating ICC development through ML poses significant challenges. Traditional language assessment methods may not adequately capture the intercultural skills and competencies that ML aims to develop. Studies such as those by Hayroyan and Mkhitaryan (2021) and Birjandy and Khatib (2018) discussed the difficulties in designing appropriate assessment tools that can measure both language proficiency and intercultural competence. This challenge complicates the process of demonstrating the tangible benefits of ML in EFL/ESL education.

Teacher Preparedness and Training: the last critical challenge is the lack of teacher preparedness and training in effectively incorporating ML into their teaching practices. Studies like Bagui and Zohra (2020) and Ousiali et al. (2023) pointed out that many teachers feel ill-equipped to address the complex cultural themes presented in ML. This lack of training can lead to superficial treatment of cultural issues or even perpetuate cultural stereotypes, undermining the goal of fostering true intercultural competence.

4. Discussion
The following discussion synthesizes key insights from the systematic review, examining the impact of ML on ICC development, the limitations of current research, and the implications for future studies.

4.1 The Impact of ML on ICC Development in EFL/ESL Education
The systematic review covered studies from 12 countries across Asia, Europe, and other regions, focusing primarily on undergraduate EFL/ESL students. It examined diverse texts, teaching methods, research approaches (including action research, quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods), and data collection tools (e.g., questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations), offering comprehensive insights into the impact of ML on the development of ICC in educational contexts. Figure 2 outlines the key benefits and challenges of integrating ML into ICC development.
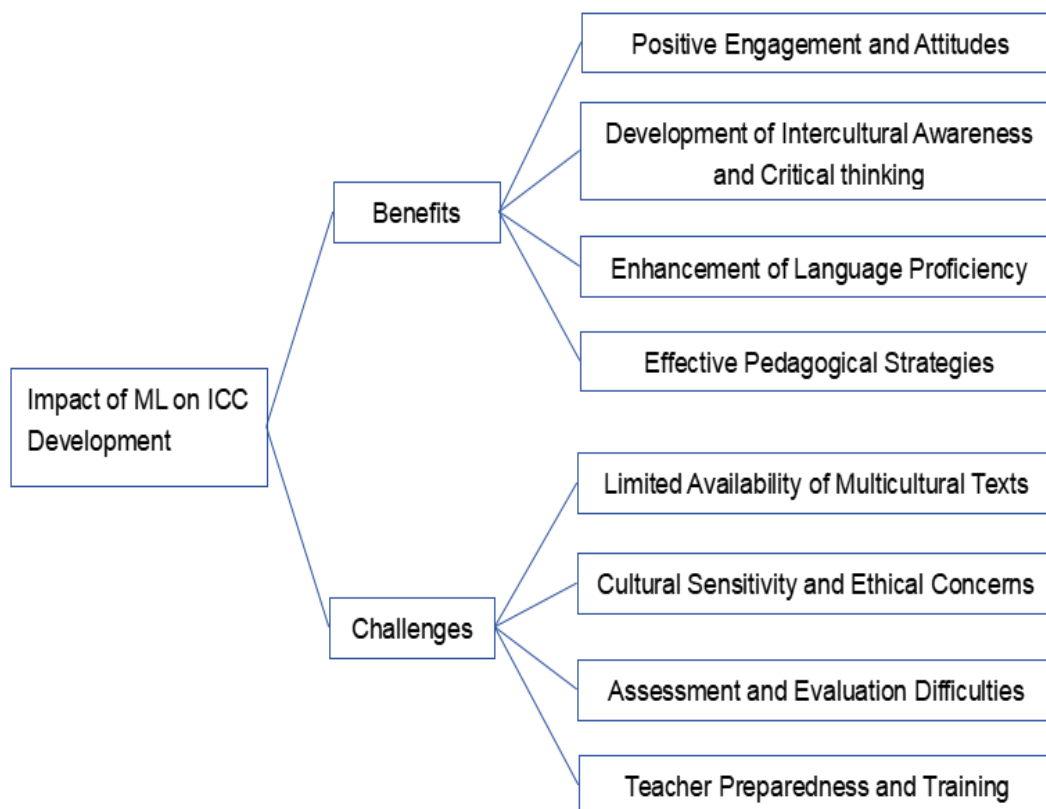
Figure 2: The impact of ML on ICC development

The benefits identified from this systematic review suggested ML integration in EFL/ESL education can significantly contribute to enhancing students' intercultural knowledge, critical thinking skills, and cultural awareness, as shown in Figure 2. This finding aligns with Byram's ICC Model, which emphasizes attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical awareness as essential components for effective intercultural communication (Byram, 2020). Neely (2022) asserts that ML exposes students to diverse cultural perspectives through characters, settings, and themes, fostering empathy, dismantling stereotypes, and curiosity towards different cultures—core attitudes in Byram's model. Research by Aicha (2019) further supports ML's role in deepening students' cultural knowledge and analytical skills, encouraging them to challenge stereotypes and navigate cultural complexities.

Additionally, the integration of ML in EFL/ESL education significantly enhances students' language proficiency. Reading multicultural texts exposes students to a variety of linguistic expressions, idioms, and vocabulary. According to Cantizano (2020), this exposure broadens students' linguistic knowledge base, enabling them to understand and effectively use a wider range of language structures. Studies by Permatasari and Andriyanti (2021) and Birjandy and Khatib (2018) demonstrated how engagement with ML improves students' skills in oral communication, reading comprehension, and writing skills. This dual benefit underscored that ML could be a valuable source and an appropriate tool for promoting ICC of learners. It enriches both cultural understanding and linguistic

competence, equipping students to engage respectfully and effectively in diverse intercultural interactions.

Despite the benefits outlined in this systematic review, integrating ML into EFL/ESL education for the development of ICC faces significant challenges, as illustrated in Figure 2. Qualitative analysis of studies revealed a major obstacle related to the limited availability of diverse and suitable ML texts. Cantizano (2020) highlights that many educational curriculums still lack sufficient texts that represent a wide range of cultural perspectives, which limits students' exposure to different cultural narratives and voices. Even when diverse texts are available, not all are suitable for educational purposes. Hoff (2019) points out that some texts may lack the depth or quality necessary to engage students meaningfully or to challenge their thinking. Ensuring that the selected literature is both age-appropriate and academically rigorous is essential. Apparently, studies by Permatasari and Andriyanti (2021) and Sokolova (2015) have highlighted the difficulty in sourcing multicultural texts that authentically represent various cultural perspectives while meeting curriculum requirements. This limitation restricts students' exposure to a variety of cultural contexts, thereby impacting the effectiveness of ML in developing ICC.

Another critical challenge was the lack of teacher preparedness and training in effectively navigating cultural sensitivity and ethical concerns associated with ML texts. Educators must skillfully address potentially sensitive cultural topics without reinforcing stereotypes or causing offense. Rodgers (2020) emphasizes the importance of teachers being aware of how different cultures are represented in literature and how these representations can impact students' perceptions and identities. Studies by Bagui and Zohra (2020) and Ousiali et al. (2023) underscored the need for professional development programs that enhance teachers' cultural competence and pedagogical skills in using ML effectively. These challenges underscore the complexity involved in effectively integrating ML into EFL/ESL education to enhance ICC. Addressing them requires concerted efforts in curriculum development, teacher training, and research to ensure that ML contributes positively to students' intercultural communicative competence in language learning contexts.

4.2 Limitations and Future Research

While this systematic review offered valuable insights into the impact of integrating ML into EFL/ESL education for enhancing ICC, it was important to acknowledge two significant limitations. One limitation has been its restriction to English-language studies published between 2013 and 2023, potentially excluding relevant research in other languages or before 2013, thereby limiting the comprehensiveness of the findings. Another critical limitation concerns the quality and variability of the included studies. The review identified differences in study designs, sample sizes, and methodologies across the literature, which could impact the reliability and generalizability of the findings.

Based on the insights gained from this study, future research can contribute significantly by prioritizing these three aspects. First, there is a pressing need to

establish appropriate criteria for ML selection in future research. Slaughter (2021) emphasized the importance of assessing the authenticity of ML texts, including criteria such as accuracy in portraying cultural practices, perspectives, and values without reinforcing stereotypes. It is essential to develop frameworks or checklists for educators to evaluate the authenticity of ML texts before integration into curricula (Ousiali et al., 2023). Research should also refine criteria for selecting ML texts that align with educational goals, such as promoting ICC. Permatasari and Andriyanti (2021) highlighted the need for texts that offer cultural insights while also enhancing language skills, critical thinking, and empathy among students.

Second, future research should also focus on teacher training in ML integration. Bagui and Zohra (2020) emphasized the need for developing professional development programs that enhance teachers' cultural competence, pedagogical skills, and ability to navigate sensitive cultural discussions in the classroom. Studies can explore the role of technology, such as online platforms and educational apps, in supporting educators with diverse ML materials and addressing resource limitations. Sokolova (2015) noted that technology can enhance access to culturally authentic resources and facilitate effective ML integration.

Third, developing robust assessment tools for evaluating ICC resulting from ML integration is also an important area for future research. Research should prioritize the design of assessment measures, including performance-based tasks, portfolios, and reflective journals, aimed at effectively measuring students' intercultural competence. Hayroyan and Mkhitaryan (2021) suggested that performance-based tasks should simulate real-life scenarios, such as role-plays and cultural presentations, to demonstrate students' ability to navigate intercultural interactions. Implementing portfolio assessment can provide holistic insights into students' ICC development over time, while self-assessment and reflection activities can empower students to monitor their own learning journey effectively. Research can explore how these assessment methods capture students' abilities to navigate intercultural interactions and critically analyze cultural nuances presented in ML texts.

The integration of ML into EFL/ESL education offers profound opportunities for enhancing ICC among students. While challenges such as limited availability of suitable texts and gaps in teacher preparedness exist, addressing these through comprehensive curriculum development, targeted teacher training, and innovative research initiatives can maximize the benefits of ML in language learning contexts. By continuing to refine practices and expand research in this area, educators can better prepare students for effective communication and engagement in a diverse global society.

5. Conclusions
In conclusion, this systematic review highlighted the significant potential of integrating ML into EFL/ESL educational contexts to foster ICC among learners. The synthesis of 16 studies revealed the benefits of ML, including enriched intercultural knowledge, awareness, and attitudes among students. Beyond ICC

development, these benefits encompass a deeper appreciation of cultural diversity and the promotion of respectful and empathetic interactions among students. Despite these advantages, challenges such as the availability and appropriateness of materials, practical engagement opportunities, teacher preparedness, and evaluation tools require careful consideration and strategic approaches. However, by addressing these challenges through collaborative efforts, professional development initiatives, and innovative teaching strategies, educators can harness the full potential of ML to create inclusive learning environments that foster intercultural understanding and prepare learners for active participation in a diverse global society. Through ongoing research and implementation of best practices, the future of ML integration in EFL/ESL education holds promise for advancing intercultural communication and promoting meaningful cross-cultural exchanges among learners.

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