FOSTERING INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS IN ONLINE EAP CLASSROOMS USING THE REALIST SOAP OPERA GENRE

Emmanouela V. Seiradakis[i]
Technical University of Crete,
Greece
&
Hellenic Open University,
Greece

Abstract:

This qualitative work attempts to investigate the viability of using the British realist soap genre as an authentic cultural resource for raising the intercultural awareness of Greek EFL university students about social issues relevant to their age. Five students participated in this study. Participants watched thirteen online episodes of the British realist soap EastEnders for one academic semester within their EAP courses and completed weekly reflective tasks based on the storylines of each episode. Data were gathered from semi-structured interviews. The findings garnered suggest that British realist soap operas could be exploited in order to foster intercultural awareness processes of Greek EFL university students. This small-scale study highlights the need for further research in the field of intercultural awareness within the EAP context. Additionally, it is proposed that EFL teachers in Greece and elsewhere invest more in intercultural training and use authentic materials more often in the EAP classroom.

Keywords: intercultural awareness, ethnographic skills, EFL, soap operas

1. Introduction

Intercultural competence is considered crucial within the contemporary ELT landscape especially within higher education settings regardless of whether a university is within an anglophone or non-anglophone context (Liu & Fang 2017). Despite criticism related to language imperialism, English has acquired multiple roles as an additional, an international and a global language and constitutes the main vehicle of communication between users from non-English speaking countries across the world. Within university settings, the globalized academic arena is largely dominated by English across disciplines, countries, and cultures and English for academic purposes (EAP) practitioners are now required to equip their students not only with adequate academic

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[i] Correspondence: email eseiradaki@tuc.gr, emmiseira@hotmail.com

literacy skills such as academic reading or writing but also with skills related to intercultural competence (Kusumaningputri & Widodo 2018).

Previous works in EFL contexts exploring potential approaches integrating cultural artifacts for raising university students' intercultural awareness include studies using foreign films in Vietnam (Chao 2013; Truong & Tran 2013) and China (Yang & Fleming 2013), cultural portfolios in Taiwan (Su 2011) and digital photographs in Indonesia (Kusumaningputri & Widodo 2018). Although these studies have provided us with valuable insights on how cultural artifacts can facilitate intercultural awareness processes within EFL classroom settings, researchers, within the EFL field urge for more works exploring the potentials of today's digital era in designing materials and tasks aiming at raising university students' intercultural awareness (Kusumaningputri & Widodo 2018). In response to this call, this classroom-based work investigates in what ways authentic television-mediated intercultural tasks heighten university students' intercultural awareness. More specifically, the study aims to explore through interviews if and how EastEnders, a British realist soap, can function as a stimulus and encourage Greek EFL students to act as ethnographers (Byram 2020) and explore certain aspects of the British and Greek culture including troubled youth, family and drug culture issues.

2. Intercultural awareness in EFL higher education contexts

The concept of intercultural awareness advocates that cultures can only be defined in relation to each other (Byram 2020). The core argument of intercultural learning theory is that exploration of the target language culture presupposes exploration of one's own culture. This is the only way not to present the target language culture or any culture as static and monolithic (Byram 2020). This process implies a window where we see the target language culture/cultures and a mirror where we discover our own culture (Huber-Kriegler, Lazar & Strange 2003). According to Byram (1997:66), especially with adult language learners such an exploration implies a comparative approach: "*Teachers of adult learners can usually assume greater familiarity of learners' own and the other culture*". Based on Byram's comparative approach teachers and learners attempt to identify similarities and differences, discuss them and move from the surface culture to the deeper layers of cultural phenomena (Byram 2020). During this exploration, a lot of "why" questions should be asked in order to explore how others see us and how we see others. This process helps us to become conscious of our cross-perceptions about others and also about the way we view the world ourselves (Tseng 2000).

In the long run, developing intercultural awareness implies a move from ethnocentrism to ethno-relativism, the ability to be able to see things from someone else's perspective, thus developing empathy. The ultimate goal of intercultural learning is reaching "*intercultural competence*" the ability to be able to communicate effectively with representatives from other cultures at any place, any time (Byram 2020; Byram & Wegner 2018). In order for one to become an intercultural competent speaker that will function adequately in any situation one has to work on cultural and intercultural skills in the

classroom (Byram 2020; Tseng 2000). The skills of relating and interpreting information based on a document can according to Byram (2020) be practiced within the classroom walls. Learners' critical reflections on media representations of otherness can function as valuable training for practicing these skills. In fact, Byram (2020) maintains that the classroom provides a neutralized environment without the pressure of time of real-time intercultural incidents and thus learners can gain valuable practice for these skills within its walls. Likewise, Dlaska (2000) also proposes that comparing and "*finding similarities and differences without making a value judgment*" should be included in the skills that language learners should use in the classroom (:254).

The ethnographic approach to raising intercultural awareness also highlights the significance of teaching skills rather than information (Byram & Feng 2004). According to Barro, Shirley, and Roberts "*Ethnography is loosely defined as the study of "other" people and the social and cultural patterns that give meaning to their lives*" (1998: 76). The ethnographic approach is considered an integral part of raising intercultural awareness of language learners "*as a means of understanding the cultural practices, meanings and beliefs of unfamiliar social groups*" (Byram & Fleming 1998: 1). Ethnography is the methodology originally used by anthropologists. However, it has been extensively used with language learners both in naturalistic settings and in EFL-structured environments (Corbett 2022). Learners of languages should according to Byram (1989:143) function both as ethnographers and as informants. Being an ethnographer entails exploring the deeper layers of cultural phenomena. This approach is based on the argument that ethnographic skills such as observing, describing, analyzing, interpreting, and reporting differences and similarities of other cultures in relation to one's own culture are valuable when one communicates with representatives from different cultures. Thus, these skills should be in-cooperated and practiced in the language learning classroom as well (Corbett 2022). In fact, Byram and Feng (2004) note that what really matters is for learners to use these skills and not the actual outcomes of this procedure.

Dlaska (2000) proposes that these skills should be practiced in recognizing and identifying stereotypes. This process she argues is rather motivating even for university students as this aspect of culture that learners "*consider themselves to be experts in the language learning classroom*" (:250). Substituting negative stereotypes with positive ones is not the goal. Instead, this process should involve an investigation of the "other" highlighting the fact that our world is culturally diverse.

On a practical note, relevant literature suggests that raising cultural awareness should involve learners' interpretations and not right or wrong answers. Thus, when using an authentic text in the classroom whether that is television, literature, or the internet, the teacher- the culture educator according to Byram (2020) should encourage learners' personal opinions and critical reflections both about the target language culture and of their own. Byram, Esarte-Sarries, and Taylor (1991) suggest that a good culture learner is one who carries out comparisons, reflects on his/her own cultural identity, and analyses cultural phenomena. There are many difficulties in actually assessing whether and when intercultural goals have been achieved (Byram 2020). Additionally, there are

authors that doubt the effectiveness of intercultural learning in general and highlight the danger that instead of promoting ethnorelativsm, intercultural teaching may indeed emphasize and over present cultural differences (Sapiridou 2004).

2.1 Authentic materials and intercultural awareness in EFL settings

Authentic materials are regarded as rather effective in raising the cultural awareness of language learners (Barekat & Nobakhti, 2014; Byram 2020; Byram & Fleming 1998, Corbett, 2022; Kozhevnikova 2014). Byram and Feng (2004) consider authenticity an integral part of raising cultural awareness in the language classroom and they refer to the notion of *"intercultural authenticity"*. They argue that even the possible difficulties learners might come through when using an authentic text can actually be exploited in favor of raising the cultural awareness of learners. Based on this notion, teachers could encourage and provoke learners' initial response and interpretation of the chosen text. This process could then lead to discussing various aspects of culture and stimulate learners' interpretations and reflections through mediation and negotiations (2004:160). Tomalin and Stempleski (1990) advocate that observing differences in cultural behavior on television is suitable not only for immersing successfully in another culture:

Observing differences in cultural behavior is not only suitable training for operating successfully in an alien community. It is also a resource for communication in the language classroom (Tomalin & Stempleski 1990:59).

In relation to soap operas Katz and Liebes (1990) preserve that the specific genre provokes discussion and exploration of other cultures and that it is effective in raising the cultural awareness of viewers. However, we should keep in mind that the suggestion of the current work is that authentic television could be used within the language-learning classroom. This by itself makes the decision of using the specific genre complex. Watching television equals decoding cultural codes (Katz and Liebes 1990). Decoding the cultural codes of British soaps can be a challenge since Greek students who are the target audience of the present work have never watched a British soap opera before. Language-wise, Richards (2001: 253) claims that alongside many advantages, authentic materials often contain difficult language, unneeded vocabulary items, and complex language structures, which often cause a burden to the teacher. From Krashen's famous i + 1we are told that the ideal input is comprehensible but slightly challenging. If the input is too difficult, the student will give up in frustration. In order for learning to occur, there should be some feeling of success (Krashen 1985).

2.2 EastEnders and the British realist soap opera genre

EastEnders is one of the most post popular and controversial soap operas in Britain (Attfield 2021; Allen 1995; Geraghty 2010). The amount of controversy it has received signifies, as in most cases in television, the massive success of the show throughout all the different categories of viewers (Buckingham 1987). The lives and scandals of the actors starring in the series are at times more interesting than the soap itself. It is a series that has created its own culture, a pure domestic television product that anyone living in

Britain, even if they never watched it, they are certainly aware of its existence and its iconic status in British television (Geraghty 2010).

The show is a BBC production and was first broadcast in 1985. Since then, it has won numerous awards. EastEnders belongs to the British realist soap genre and that was the main reason the specific soap was chosen. The specific soap opera genre does not exist in Greek television which is full of either Greek or American productions. There is a number of characteristics that define a soap as a "realist soap". Firstly, realist soaps make use of national language and where necessary employ "regional" forms of the specific language. The settings are also important. The architecture, the interior decoration of the buildings, and the layout of the streets should reflect and identify the domestic setting of the region where the specific soap opera takes place. Other than the language and the setting, the lifestyle of the region and the country that is being represented through the soap, plays an important part in the realism of a show (Bowles 2020; Allen 1995, Buckingham 1987). EastEnders fullfils all the above criteria. As the title signifies, the show is situated in London's Eats End and the dialect used is cockney (Allen 1995, Buckingham 1987).

The specific soap belongs to the 1980s generation of soap operas that attempted to reflect realistically the conflicts that occur in real life. It was one of the first soaps that integrated racial issues, LGBTQ community issues, Aids, domestic abuse, drug abuse, alcoholism, teenage pregnancy, and other social issues (Bowles 2020; Geraghty 1991, 1992, 1995, Buckingham 1987, Allen 1995). The social issues it presents have made it popular with young audiences since these issues are relevant to young people (Bowles 2020).

EastEnders also includes representatives of races other than white in an attempt to depict multiculturalism in contemporary Britain. Whereas American, Latin American, and Greek soaps have inherent an element of escapism the British "school" of soaps is well known and loved for their realism. One only needs to watch ten minutes of an episode of EastEnders to notice the difference. Realism is a key concept in British soap operas (Allen 1995; Attfield, 2021; Bowles 2020). Unlike most American and Greek soaps the characters of the show belong to the working class and thus the audience is invited to watch the show from this perspective (Koukoutsaki 2003). This adds a real essence to the show and distinguishes it significantly from the soaps that the target learners of this study are used to.

2.2.1 The EastEnders microcosm

Prior to using EastEnders as an intercultural tool, one has to take into consideration the possible disadvantages of using it in the classroom. Since popular culture appearing on screen is produced by capitalist corporations, it is obvious that what really matters is selling the actual products rather than acculturating viewers (Fiske 1987). Despite the fact that EastEnders belongs to the realist soap opera genre, "reality" is completely artificial. EastEnders is certainly more realistic than Greek or American soap operas and

telenovellas but it by no means depicts reality. In fact, the show depicts a culture of its own and it is this distinct culture that has made it so popular amongst all audiences.

The show has received lots of criticism for being too brutal for increasing its viewing rates and not for depicting reality as BBC bosses claim. It is actually considered to be one of the most violent soap operas on British television (Allen 1995, Buckingham 1987). Some episodes are certainly not for classroom usage at least with younger learners. The series is mostly built on the tensions and arguments between the family and the community members which very often turn out to be rather cruel. These constant disputes have apparently a negative effect on the show's realism perceived by the audience and make the atmosphere dark and depressing (Millwood-Hargrave 2003).

There are lots of stereotypes that are used in order to make the show believable to the target audience. Based on the political mythology of British dialectology, speaking with a particular accent identifies you with a particular class (O'Donnell 1999). The British audience is of course well informed and knows that firstly, these accents are exaggerated and secondly that a cockney accent does not necessarily indicate a working-class member. However, these stereotypes can be more misleading for an audience, which is not that familiar with the British codes of television.

The depiction of the working class is also questionable despite the claims of the production team of the show. O'Donnell (1999) wonders whether a typical member of the working class in Britain today owns pubs, launderettes, cafes, and nightclubs as most characters in this soap do. He states:

"The British working class is in fact one of the great absentees of current British soaps. The overwhelming bulk of the characters that currently populate British soaps own. pubs, cafés…market halls. This is not by any stretch of the imagination the British working class. On the contrary, it is quite clearly and unequivocally the traditional petite bourgeoisie." (O'Donnell 1999: 207).

Other stereotypes include the physical appearance of a working-class member, whether that is a woman or a man. Male and female characters represent a class that lacks money and so inevitably lacks education and the ability to keep up with the demands of the twenty-first century. Additionally, gender and sexuality stereotypes are promoted in order to create tension and reasons for good gossip on a daily basis (Geraghty 1991). Moreover, despite the fact that EastEnders do include other races in their narrative the core of the community are white families. The series has been criticized for the superficial and fake way they deal with racial issues and for the poor portrayal of the multicultural British society (Allan 1995; Buckingham 1987).

The representation of family as depicted in EastEnders is open and usually, it includes members that are not immediately related. The extended family plays a rather crucial part in the lives of the characters. In fact, most of the characters are related in some way and this also has a negative impact on the realism of the series (Millwood-Hargrave & Gatfield 2002). It is rather questionable whether the family in contemporary Britain is

anywhere close to what is depicted in the series. Furthermore, the construction of the community in EastEnders is geographically based on Albert square and on particular streets. There is no other image from London. Thus, from the point of view of the Greek viewer, East London would seem like a small village with a pub, a mini market, and a launderette. All characters have daily encounters around these settings. Everyone knows everyone and they are all interested in each other's lives. Everyone has fights and disputes primarily because they are interested in keeping the community going. In fact, the community ideal is never established because such an ending would also end the actual series. The nostalgic search for the community of the past is diffusive in almost all British soaps including EastEnders, especially amongst the older members of the community (Allen, 1995). Last but not least, research findings suggest that the depiction of alcohol consumption in the specific soap opera is outrageous. It can be argued that the constant image of British people drinking beer reinforces the stereotype of the British compulsive drinker (Furnham, et al, 1997).

Thus, it is given that the invisible assumptions mentioned above and also many others that certainly exist within this soap might mislead prospective viewers. This of course does not apply only to EastEnders but to all soap operas. Guest's (2002) view that when teaching culture directly, there is always the danger of misrepresenting cultures by reinforcing popular stereotypes and constructing these cultures as monolithic should always be taken under consideration. Yet since participants of the current work are adults, it could be argued that the actual stereotypes presented in the series could be used as tools for exploring, identifying, and deconstructing stereotypes encountered both in Britain and Greece.

3. Study design

3.1 Participants and setting

The participants of the current work consisted of five Greek university students (four male and one female) who were majoring in engineering at two public higher education institutions in Greece. All five of them were enrolled in online EAP courses taught by the author during the Covid-19 shutdown. Based on their self-reports, they had all begun studying English in public education in the first grade and had also attended private language schools since the second or third grade. They had all received C2 language certificates in English during middle school or high school.

Table 1: Participants' pseudonyms and demographic details

Participants	Gender	Age	Town of origin
Danos	Male	24	Athens
Giannis	Male	23	Athens
Leonidas	Male	20	Athens
Maria	Female	19	Crete
Aristos	Male	20	Crete

3.2 The episodes, the course, and the tasks

The thirteen episodes chosen aired on BBC 1 (www.easterdersbbc.uk). The specific episodes were selected because they included sensitive social issues such as drug abuse, children's abuse, LGBQT community issues, domestic violence, and representatives of multiple races. This diversity is not common in Greek television despite the fact that during the past 30 years, Greece has been developing into a multicultural, multiracial, multilingual European country. In fact, Greek mainstream media are criticized for not depicting minorities and other races in Greece, for reproducing negative stereotypes that cause xenophobia, and for the absence of LGBQT storylines (Aitaki & Chairetis 2019; Marvakis, Parsanoglou & Pavlou 2001).

The episode-mediated tasks involved weekly optional Moodle-based open-ended reflective activities that asked participants several questions on specific storylines within each episode. These tasks aimed to encourage participants to observe, describe, analyze and compare social issues depicted in each episode to their own cultures. The current study focuses on one of the first episodes that were used for the course. The specific episode revolves around Martin a teenager and his friends with drug abuse issues and the reaction of his mother (Pauline) and his stepfather (Derek) when a neighbor (Clive) calls the police and Martin ends up being arrested not only for drug abuse but also for drug dealing but his stepfather lies for him and Martin manages to get away with it.

3.3 Interviews

Each student was interviewed for about 30–40 minutes on Zoom after watching the specific episode and answering the corresponding weekly task on Moodle. The interviews were conducted in Greek, in order for the participants to be able to express themselves more fluently. Throughout the interviews, there was an attempt to encourage learners to share personal experiences with the researcher and talk freely. It should be noted that questions were not worded in the same way and were not made in the same sequence. Based on the respondents' answers the researcher altered both the wording and the sequence. Not all questions were made to all participants. Based on the flow of the interview and the participant's age and gender, the researcher made the questions that she perceived as more effective. These questions were based on the literature reviewed for this study (Byram 2020) and also on other works that have focused on the use of video and films for raising students' intercultural awareness within tertiary education EFL settings (Chao 2013; Truong & Tran 2013; Yang & Fleming 2013). Interview questions were directly related to the episode storylines and were categorized under three axes focusing on i) youth troubles ii) family and community and iii) drug abuse.

3.4 Data collection and analysis

Constant comparison as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) was employed in order to analyze interview data. Initially, data were framed under three umbrella categories according to the research questions mentioned previously: (1) students' use of ethnographic skills on issues related to youth troubles in Britain and Greece (2) students'

use of ethnographic skills relate to family and community issues in Britain and Greece (3) students' use of ethnographic skills on drug culture issues in Britain and Greece. Subsequently, the author read transcripts repeatedly and added relevant keywords which in turn formed the basis for codes and sub-codes which were colour coded in order to facilitate comparisons across participants' accounts. Resulting themes were summarized in an attempt to extract the "gist" of what participants had said and specific quotes which vividly expressed participants' thoughts were recorded separately in order to be presented in the results.

4. Findings

Findings are presented in three parts: (1) Youth troubles (2) Family and community (3) Drug culture in Britain and Greece.

4.1 Youth troubles

4.1.1 Imagining Martin and his friends around Athens instead of London
Participants did not observe any significant differences between Martin and his friends and Greek teenagers concerning their behavior and their appearances. While they thought that Martin and his friends would most probably live in less privileged areas of central Athens, Leonidas, Maria, and Aristos pointed out that that doesn't mean that drugs do not exist in more expensive areas of the Greek capital thus implying that drug abuse is not a matter of social class or money. Participants thought that Martin and his friends would probably live in less privileged areas of Athens, either central areas or western suburbs areas that are considered poor. Maria, Leonidas, and Aristos noted though that drugs also exist in richer areas of the Greek capital:

> "…They would probably live in blue-collar, poorer areas not that drugs do not exist in Kifissia, [a posh area of Athens] but you will not see kids selling it in on the street…but yes in general their style and attitude is similar to here…" (Maria)

> "You could see them [Martin and his friends] in poorer areas of Athens… Not that drugs don't exist in richer areas, but money blankets everything….I presume you don't see these things in posh areas of London either…it's not about the country, it's about social class and money…" (Aristos)

Participants also reflected on incidents they have witnessed in the Greek capital similar to the scene with Martin's friend stumbling under drug influence. It is interesting that participants thought that drug abuse in Greece has increased in the past years both amongst teenagers and people of their own age. Greece based on participants' views is evolving into a European westernized country like Britain and drug abuse is one of the "*negatives effects*" of this westernization. All participants thought that drug abuse in

Britain is more widespread than in Greece. However, each one of them analyzed why according to his/her view drug abuse is more common depending on his/her own perceptions. Apart from differences between the two societies, the family appeared to be the main reason participants thought that drug abuse is more often in Britain than in Greece.

Concerning drug abuse and drug dealing as depicted in the episode, Danos thought that it does happen in Greece. However, he explained that Martin and his friends seemed too young to be involved in drug-dealing. He believed that the fact that Martin and his friends were dealing drugs in broad daylight was a stretch by Greek standards. He noted, however, that the phenomenon of teenagers dealing drugs does exist in Greece as well. Leonidas' response was similar:

"They could be Greek teenagers living in Athens. Not the Athens where I grew up but things have changed: drugs are everywhere now and it is not as shocking as it used to be… ."(Leonidas)

4.2 Family and community
4.2.1 The neighbor, the police report, and the community
Regarding Clive (neighbor) and his report to the police, all participants were judgmental about his action. However, they recognized that they could think of a lot of Greeks that would do the same. It is interesting that two participants (Danos and Leonidas) pointed out that if Clive were Greek, he would probably contact Martin's parents first. This answer probably implies that a Greek neighbor would actually care about the teenager's problem rather than his punishment. All participants appeared cynical about the fact that he actually reported Martin and his friends to the police:

"…Of course he could be Greek, I actually think of a lot of people that I know who would do the same even for less serious reasons… people who have nothing better to do with their lives… ." (Giannis)

"Aristos also thought that Clive could be Greek, saying: "Yes, I think that a Greek could do it, out of jealousy, spite or just to gossip around in the neighborhood". Maria had an analogous view: "…Nationality isn't really a concern in these issues I think… He could be Greek, they do the same thing for less serious stuff like noise pollution …"".

4.2.2 The mother figure and family in Britain and in Greece
All participants empathized with Martin's mother who is worried about her son and does everything she can to help him. Maria was a bit more judgmental about how Martin's mother handled her son than other participants. This could be attributed to the fact that she is a woman and thus she can identify more with the "mother role". Aristos pointed out: *"Pauline cares about her son, just like a Greek mum. Like any mum in the world, she is*

worried because her son is in trouble, of course she could be Greek… ". Giannis also seemed rather empathetic towards Pauline:

> *"I think that Pauline could be a Greek mother, in fact, I think that she could be any mother around the world... I think as a father I would react the same, I would be happy for my child as well that he went through with the interview with the police officer, I would encourage and reward him in the hope that he would do better like Pauline did if I also didn't know what was happening behind my back… I think that Greek parents would probably be worse than Pauline and Derek in the sense that they would exaggerate more about their son's success and progress if they thought that he is getting better."* (Giannis)

Danos also agreed that Pauline could be Greek, but he noted that a Greek mother would probably be more "controlling":

> *"Pauline could be a Greek mother in that she is worrying about her son's future, but I think that a Greek mother would be more cautious because Martin had done it again, he had troubles with the police. …I don't know what I would do, I hope that my child would not end up doing it. If he did do it I think I would try to be stricter with him. I don't know if that would help of course, because when you are a teenager, you end up doing what you want anyway."* (Danos)

Whilst Maria said that Pauline could be Greek because any mother would be worried about her son when asked what she would do if she was Martin's mother she seemed to differ in her opinion:

> *"I think that if Martin's was my child, I would be aware that he still is on drugs or that he is selling it. Pauline hasn't understood what's going, she thinks her son is perfectly fine and she rewards him for it. She knows that he had problems before, so I don't understand how she believes that suddenly everything is OK. She believes whatever Martin tells her. .. I would certainly be stricter than her. I would not believe what he would tell me, I would keep an eye on him… It's a matter of character and the experiences one has…Pauline is naive, like many mothers I know… ."* (Maria)

Aristos also thought that Pauline could be Greek but he believed that a Greek mother or his own mother would react differently in the same situation:

> *"A Greek mother would react more… My mum would be stricter than Pauline. She would not only be worried about covering up for me to the police officer, but she would consult a psychologist or a social worker, she would do more to help me."* (Aristos)

Interestingly, all participants thought that a Greek family would be stricter with Martin. Leonidas and Giannis seemed to be less judgmental about Martin's family and

the way Pauline and Derek (who in the series is like a father to Martin since his father has passed away) handled the whole situation whereas Danos, and Aristos thought that they should react more. Regarding Derek and his 'sacrifice" for Martin, all participants thought that it was the right thing to do. Maria more than the other participants reflected on how important family is. This could again be attributed to the fact that she is a woman and Greek women are very much concerned about family issues even from a really young age.

Leonidas also felt that a Greek family would be more cautious than Pauline and Derek and that they would "control" Martin more. In relation to Derek -who in the series is like a father to Martin- and the fact that that he ended up going to jail for Martin's sake, all participants thought that any parent or parental figure would do the same. Danos replied: *"Of course, my father would do the same and I would as well for my child…"*.

All participants, except Danos, referred to the same model of family they thought existed in Britain However, participants also recognized flows in the concept of the Greek family as well and made some rather critical reflections. Some participants were in fact rather critical about the fact that in Greece, parents tend to be over-protective and attempt to control the lives of children even when they reach their thirties. Younger participants, Maria, and Aristos while recognizing that Greek parents are actually overprotective with their children, and sometimes suppressive thought that it is better than letting teenagers *"doing whatever they want"* because in another case they would end up like Martin as Maria pointed out. It is interesting that younger participants (university students) maintain that family is the main and more significant reason for the fact that drug abuse is more common in Britain. Compared to older participants younger participants advocated rather strongly the concept of family existing in Greece. This could be attributed to the fact that younger participants are university students and still "depend" psychologically more on their parents. On the other hand, the reason could be that the issue of family is more relevant to their age whereas older participants have "passed" this age and did not care to "defend" the concept of family as much.

4.3 Drug culture in Britain and Greece

The depiction of marijuana in the episode functioned as a trigger for participants to make critical reflections about Greek society and how Greeks handle the drug abuse issue. Each participant interpreted and related in a different way why such an image would never appear in Greek television in the afternoon. Four out of five participants did reflect critically on Greek culture about being too conservative on a specific issue.

Interestingly, all participants, including Giannis, believed that Greek society is more conservative in issues like drug abuse compared to British society and prefers hiding the problem instead of actually dealing with it. Participants thought that families in Greece hide issues like drugs from relatives whilst at the same time arguing about a strong family is Greece. Even younger participants who throughout the interviews endorsed the Greek family and the way it operates were rather critical about the fact that in Greece families prefer hiding the "shame" rather than dealing with it. In addition, it

should be noted that based on data, it seems that participants think that in general, Greek parents compared to the British tend to exaggerate both in showing off their children's "successes" and in hiding their "failures" (such as drug abuse). On whether drug abuse is more prevalent amongst people of their own age, all the participants thought that drug abuse is probably more common in Britain:

> *"I don't really know if drug abuse in Britain is more common than in Greece but I do suspect that it is. This is despite the fact that one would consider that drug abuse would be more common for Greeks when unemployment rates are so high after the ten years of economical crisis…I think it's easier to get your hands on marijuana in Britain, I'm not saying it's a trend but in my head, it seems like a more open, more modernized country and things are more out in the open there in the sense that lots of issues that are a taboo here in Greece are probably ok there.. LGBQT or interracial relationships, for example, they probably are more open there as well."* (Giannis)

Maria also thought that drugs are easier to find in Britain because she perceives Britain as being a more "open", "free" and "modernized" society where drugs are easier to find. Aristos referred to clubs and nightlife: "From friends studying there and movies I've seen I think the drug abuse is more common there, it's easier to find drugs in a club in Britain, not that they don't exist here either but… ".

Leonidas added:

> *"…Soft drugs like cannabis are used as a form of entertainment in Britain, whereas in Greece there still is a certain stereotype, a stigma behind the drug user, the user that has no life lying on the park bench. This is of course changing over the years... ."* (Leonidas)

Two participants Giannis and Leonidas added that in their view Britain is a country that has the infrastructure and system required to deal with the drug abuse problem. In Greece on the other hand, family support and social support for drug users are deficient. All the participants said that they knew people who at some point in their lives experimented with drugs when they were younger. However, with the exception of Maria, none had a close friend who had such a problem.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Findings indicate that EastEnders did function as a stimulus for participants to explore their own culture as well as the target language culture concerning issues related to teenagers, family, community and drug abuse. In this sense, it could be argued that British realist soaps could be used as a vehicle for presenting culture as a constant process of exploring and negotiating meanings (Dlaska 2000, Byram 2020, Byram & Feng 2004, Tseng 2002).

Overall, participants explored both the target language culture and their own regarding the social issues within the storylines of the episode and were able to use their ethnographic skills even to a minimum level. Each participant, observed, analyzed, interpreted, and reported a number of differences and similarities between the British and Greek cultures which according to Byram (2020) and Corbett (2022) is valuable training for adult language learners. The differences and similarities they observed varied according to each participant's individualized culture. In this respect, one could argue that they did act as both ethnographers and informants (Byram 2020).

Participants' views on drug abuse in the target language culture were mostly based on what they had heard from friends who studied in Britain. Maria who was one of the two participants who had traveled to Britain for vacation and also had socialized with Britons was in fact one of the participants that held strong convictions regarding drug abuse and Britons. Likewise, Aristos who socialized with young Britons also had certain assumptions about young Britons and drug abuse. Thus, it appears once more that nor contact with native speakers of a language nor traveling to the target language culture alone can demolish generalizations about the target language culture as literature on students studying abroad suggests (Byram 2020).

Participants used their cultural skills such as comparing and contrasting differences and similarities between their own culture to the target language culture. Thus, one could argue that maybe they became conscious of their cross-perceptions about Britons and drug abuse and also about the way they view drug abuse themselves. Hence, it is possible that participants' intercultural awareness was raised, in the sense that while participants had certain convictions about Britons and drug abuse, they also reflected critically on how drug abuse is dealt with in their own country. Overall, the findings are in line with previous works (Chao 2013; Truong & Tran 2014) which have also explored the use of different television genres and films for raising university students' intercultural awareness within EFL contexts. Accordingly, it is recommended that EFL teachers within tertiary education settings should make an effort to provide intercultural learning opportunities within the standard EAP curricula and use television or films as a foundation for designing suitable materials and tasks that trigger processes related to intercultural sensitivity and awareness.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

About the Author
Dr. Emmanouela V. Seiradakis studied in the UK (B.A, M.A, PGDip) and in Greece (PhD). She has been teaching in tertiary education for more than ten years. Her research interests include special and intercultural education, educational technologies, EFL and EAP.

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