

CRITICAL INCIDENTS - AN ENABLING TOOL FOR TEACHING LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

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Abstract: In the globalized world of the 21st century, English language programmes can no longer focus on language alone if they support the claim that their goal is to develop the learners' communication competence. Since language is a bearer of culture, 'culture' teaching becomes an educational issue which transcends the traditional limits of language teaching. Language and culture should blend harmoniously in modern teaching and learning of English as a foreign language. Although it is still debatable whether non-native teachers can actually teach the complex concept of 'culture', many studies agree that it is possible to raise learners' awareness of cultural factors and their role in communication. Building intercultural awareness in the foreign language class means providing opportunities for observation, reflection and critical thinking against the background of learning the language. Based on the author's teaching experience, the paper will try to make the point that the use of 'critical incidents' as teaching/learning tasks can raise the learners' cultural awareness and provide highly motivating language learning tasks which incorporate both language and culture.

Keywords: critical incident, culture, language teaching, cultural awareness, communication.

Preliminary remarks

Over the last few years there has been a deliberate focus on the integration of the concept of 'culture' as an integral part of English language programmes based on its recognized role in communication. On the one hand, teaching 'culture' together with language aims to contribute to the learners' overall ability to communicate effectively in the foreign language they are studying. On the other hand, the attention paid to 'culture' becomes an important feat in the education of the young people who are our learners because it enriches their world views, and thus trains them to be better communicators.

Although there are still debates over what kind of 'culture' materials to use in the classroom, one thing is commonly accepted: it is required of language learners to acquire a deeper understanding of cultural differences as well as a good mastery of, or an adequate level of competence in English. And yet, there is the issue of whether 'culture' can be taught and learned in the artificial space of the foreign language classroom. Although an answer to this question is still difficult to find considering the arguments in favour or against, we believe that if practitioners approach cultural differences in a positive and creative way, they will be able to exploit them as learning resources rather than barriers. Also, if practitioners make the teaching of 'culture' interactive by engaging their learners to observe and reflect on the differences presented, they will manage to awaken their learners' awareness of the importance cultural factors play in communication. From a wider perspective, teachers of English as a foreign language will thus help learners to form, develop and refine their own worldviews through necessary observation, critical thinking and empathy. This process will necessitate the practice of specific language skills required to communicate effectively.

Of all cultural materials, 'critical incidents' texts and tasks are likely to provide multiple opportunities for both cultural awareness raising and increased learning interaction. The current paper is going to develop this

statement using some of the considerations dedicated to this topic in the field literature. First, it will build the rationale for using ‘critical incidents’ to develop learners’ cultural awareness. Then, it will present a particular critical incident, discuss it and suggest a way to implement it into the English language class. The activity is based on the author’s personal experience and was designed for intermediate to upper intermediate students in a technical university. The paper will end with some final remarks on ‘critical incidents’ as a means of raising the learners’ intercultural awareness.

Rationale

Starting from a very general definition of ‘critical incidents’ as communication situations in which the participants come from different cultures, the first question one could ask is what potential this type of activity has to assist the teaching of ‘culture’. This part of the paper will concentrate on providing a well-grounded answer to that query.

The beginnings of the critical incident technique go back to the late 19th century, but the theory itself was not introduced to the field of cross-cultural training until the early 1960’s. A great number of so-called ‘*culture assimilators*’ or ‘*intercultural sensitizers*’ have been developed in order to help those who intend to live abroad. At present, these activities are extensively used in the training of special groups such as Peace Corps volunteers, nurses, teachers or managers. In very simple words, a critical incident is a brief description of a situation in which there is a misunderstanding, a problem or a conflict arising from cultural differences (Wight, 1995). Each incident offers enough information to set the stage and describes what happened, possibly revealing the feelings and reactions of the parties involved. The story does not explain the cultural differences; these are discovered or revealed as part of the exercise, usually using a set of questions. Becoming familiar with the ‘story’, the learners will be then asked to choose the best interpretation of the characters’ actions, behaviour and/or attitudes. Similarly to real life situations, there might always be more than one explanation that can be considered appropriate or correct.

For one thing, it can be said that ‘critical incidents’ are samples of culture with a small ‘c’. Small ‘c’ culture lends itself perfectly to teaching and learning about cultural communication. This is the invisible part of ‘culture’ associated with communication styles, verbal and non-verbal language, cultural norms and behaviours. Considered within the framework of the three p’s, i.e. *products*, *practices* and *perspectives*, culture with a small ‘c’ will cover practices, while products are big ‘C’. Perspectives refer to underlying values and beliefs and can go with both. For another thing, ‘critical incidents’ represents the type of learning input which, owing to its very authentic content and challenging nature, i.e. instances of people’s real life that present unfamiliar, confusing, amusing or intriguing experiences, is likely to have a stronger impact on the learners’ minds. Critical incidents display numerous opportunities for reflection on a wide range of cultural issues such as eye contact, personal space, time, gestures or language functions, e.g. asking for things, inviting, refusing, etc. The opportunity given to students to think deeply, thoroughly and analytically about a critical point promotes cultural awareness and fosters learning about culture-based behaviour and communication in the context of the target language culture. Lastly, ‘critical incidents’ is the type of material that does not merely offer cultural knowledge but comes very close to actually living a cultural experience. The learners as analytical readers, listeners or viewers of the problematic situation become part of the incident and experience an indirect one-to-one contact with the parties involved. This provides one of the most authentic learning experiences for the students without the need to leave the classroom.

The field literature (Tripp, 1993: 24-25) states that cultural ‘incidents’ are ‘typical’ rather than ‘critical’ at first sight. They become ‘critical’ through the analysis done to find the meaning to the situation. Researchers

like Tripp (1993) or James (2001) claim that the value of critical incidents arises from the questions that the learners are trying to answer in the process of examining the details of the incident, e.g. *What, Who, Where, When, How* and *Why*.

An obvious advantage of ‘critical incidents’ is that the examination of the whole situation leads to prolific discussions and extensive interaction between teacher and learner and, more importantly, between learner and learner. The value of these class activities arises from the overall mixture of linguistic, cultural and personal elements into the related tasks. If we agree that the skills of interpreting and relating to ‘*otherness*’ as well as the skills of exploration and self-discovery belong to the battery of skills needed to attain intercultural competence (Byram 1997), then learners are very likely to start developing their intercultural competence when they reflect on the culture-based behaviour presented in a critical incident.

‘Critical incidents’ is a teaching technique which is relatively easy to conduct and which engages participants at a meaningful level in examining attitudes, verbal and/or non-verbal behaviours that might be critical. Looking for reasonable explanations, the learners develop a complex rather than oversimplified thinking about another culture as they actually rediscover their own culture by comparing and contrasting the target ‘culture’ to their own. This is an exercise by means of which the learners increase their ‘*global mindedness*’. The concept of ‘global mindedness’ has been defined in various ways but Hett’s approach (1993) comes very close to the idea of ‘awareness’ that the teaching of ‘culture’ is supposed to awaken within the learner. The researcher identified five relevant dimensions of global-mindedness which are related to cultural values: *responsibility* (for mankind), *cultural pluralism* (appreciation of diversity of cultures), *efficacy* (international involvement and individual actions), *global-centrism* (concern for global community), and *interconnectedness*. Global or world mindedness triggers a degree of cultural sensitivity which can serve as a good foundation for cultural awareness.

As far as ‘critical incidents’ are concerned, in each situation, there is only one explanation that can be correct from the viewpoint of the target culture but, on the whole, such exercises allow learners to understand aspects of the other culture without imposing their own cultural standards. It enables them to explore and discover the implicit cultural values of a particular behaviour or attitude. On the other hand, the learners compare the target culture to their own culture and, as mentioned before, they become aware of their own cultural identity. This is a process of discovery but at the same time, of self-discovery and education for global mindedness.

As the field literature states, the purpose of the ‘critical incidents’ technique is to develop the learners’ ability to look at interaction situations from the perspective of different cultures, i.e. the one(s) in the incident and their own. Going through this type of exercise, learners are very likely to develop critical thinking, a reasonable understanding of differences and awareness that cultures, respectively behaviours and communication, are different.

The Critical Incident - “Have I been invited or not?”

Simona is a young engineer from Romania. She is attending an international conference in Vienna. The conference’s programme is full of events but she cannot afford to take part in all of them.

On the second day of the conference she runs into Maureen, a senior Irish engineer with whom Simona has been working on an international committee for two years. Maureen happily hugs Simona and asks her if she is coming to that night’s dinner in a traditional Austrian restaurant. Simona is a bit hesitant because that dinner was not planned, but Maureen says directly: “*Why don’t we have dinner together?*” Simona agrees because she

does not wish to offend Maureen. She is wondering whether that was an invitation but she finally decides that it was not.

On her way to the restaurant Simona meets Margie, a British technical expert whom she met and made friends with during the conference sessions. When Simona and Margie arrive at the restaurant, they go to Maureen's table. But, at the table for six, there is only one vacant seat. Although it is obvious that the unoccupied chair was for her, Simona feels it would not be fair to leave Margie. She just greets Maureen and goes to another table with Margie. Maureen frowns but says nothing. At the end of the evening, Simona is surprised when she finds out from the waiter that Maureen paid for her dinner. She thanks her but Maureen nonchalantly says: "*You are welcome, my dear!*"

The next morning Maureen walks past Simona as if she had never met her before. It was clear that Maureen was very upset and did not want to talk with her. Simona felt very uncomfortable and embarrassed. She wondered in dismay: "*What did I do wrong?*"

Discussion of the Critical Incident

Most of the critical incidents available in the related literature are mainly based on non-verbal behaviours, gestures and attitudes prompted by specific target cultural values. The incident presented is a special type of 'critical' situation since the problem was generated by a deficient understanding of the language followed by a behaviour that reflected that particular understanding.

The discussion of the incident can cover several cultural points. The learners should be invited to examine all the details of the problematic situation and consider both language and 'culture'.

In English, the phrase the native speaker used, i.e. '*why don't we have dinner together?*' is an informal way of inviting people. In the Romanian language the same phrase is not an invitation, it is just a suggestion for doing an activity together. Most probably, '*would you like to have dinner with me?*' would have been recognized as an invitation by the non-native speaker. Therefore, Simona behaved as if she had felt free of any commitment: she stayed with Margie because she was certain that Maureen had not invited her. The fact that Simona did not sit at Maureen's table to have dinner with her was very rude behaviour. From the native speaker's perspective, the interlocutor had accepted the invitation but did not respond to it appropriately.

Besides the main point of this critical incident, there are other cultural issues that students can analyse in relation to the situation under discussion, such as ways of declining an invitation, asking for clarifications, formality/informality as markers of the type of relationships established between two people. It is clear that Maureen as a native speaker approaches the relationship with Simona from her own cultural perspective: she extends an informal invitation to a professional partner because this is the way in which people interact in a professional environment. Unlike Britain and the USA, professional relationships in Romania tend to be more formal, particularly when there are different positions and ages.

Suggested lesson activities

1. As a warming up activity, Teacher elicits sources of possible misunderstanding in international interactions. Students are then introduced to the notion of cross-cultural misunderstanding. Teacher invites students to give examples of such misunderstandings, e.g. trips, stories from friends or family, etc.
2. Teacher reviews the vocabulary used to describe feelings such as excitement, confusion, annoyance, etc. Students are divided into small groups. They are provided with the input text. Students read the story. The reading part could be replaced by a listening activity in which the teacher simply narrates the incident and students take notes.

Students are then asked to give an interpretation to the incident. In case of several interpretations, they are asked to rank the suggested interpretations from 'most likely' to the 'least likely'.

3. Group spokespersons present their interpretations of the critical incident. A whole class discussion follows. Teacher serves as 'cultural informant' and 'moderator'.
4. As a follow-up, the teacher can revise, expand and get the students to practise the language of formal and informal ways of inviting people.
5. As homework, students are asked to come up with another critical incident to share in class. To integrate skills, students are asked to turn in a written version of the story that they are going to present orally in class.

Final remarks

Given all the considerations made throughout the paper, we believe that the employment of the 'critical incidents' technique has a strong learning potential for the learners in terms of relevancy and usefulness. It is a convenient means of raising their 'cultural' awareness and of practicing language using the four skills. The technique also appeals to the students' motivation because they are actively engaged in all the related activities. They read or listen, they get highly absorbed in the subsequent discussions and their accounts of the problem in question are usually personal and emotionally-loaded. Also, analysing someone's personal experience, which could one day be their possible experience, contributes to personal enrichment and development of self-knowledge.

To sum up, we can say that the value of critical incidents lies in the combination of cultural, linguistic and personal elements into one task. This is expected to generate our learners' cultural awareness, better linguistic proficiency and personal growth.

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