

The LLL SIG Newsletter

Critical Incidents for Raising Cultural Awareness

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Introduction

The role of culture as an integral part of language teaching has recently become increasingly popular and significant. However, it remains ambiguous and challenging in that there is little consensus on how or what aspects of culture to incorporate. Often materials dealing with culture rely on overt examples of "tourist culture" taken out of context and requiring the teacher's background and personal experience, for qualification and grounding. Such approaches can be biased and, as a result, students have difficulty making their own interpretations and tend to create an "us and them" worldview and perspective, which does little more than reinforce stereotypes and communication barriers.

This research aims at addressing the need for more balanced and practical cultural learning, in order to raise students' awareness levels and develop real intercultural communicative competence. Focusing on activities, both inside and outside the classroom, viable and effective student centered and generated approaches to cultural understanding are presented. Through the application of ethnographic research methods, students engage, explore and interact with other cultures locally. Materials included avoid directly or overtly referencing cultural information such as proper names, places, nationalities or languages. This information tends to appeal to students' preconceptions and crystalizes already held beliefs, expectations and stereotypes. The absence of cultural signposts allows students to form their own conclusions and interpret material openly, honestly and without bias. As students are in charge and free to shape their own perspectives, they are able to reach a 3rd place identity or neutral position, from which to objectively observe differences, create their own unique, worldview and ultimately become more sensitive, tolerant, open-minded and compassionate communicators.

Successful communication invariably requires mutual understanding, and the journey to understanding others must first begin with knowing yourself. How are you unique? What do you have in common with your friends, family and others in your community? How are you different? What are your strengths and weaknesses? How do you communicate with people who are different from you? In today's world, it is necessary for language learners to have a deeper

understanding of cultural differences as well as a good command of, or a level of competence in, English.

As a Global Language, English is rapidly changing and metamorphosing into many unique and diverse varieties, based on the minority cultures which use the language for their own specific purposes and within their own specific contexts. It is highly likely that Standard English will be replaced by local varieties in the near future. As a result, being able to copy behavior and perform like a native speaker may be of limited use. Today's English learners require a deeper understanding and a comprehensive arsenal of meta-skills, which will assist them with acquisition and navigation of the finer nuances and sub-levels of communication and interaction.

By approaching difference as a resource rather than as a barrier and by engaging in ethnographic research methods through observation, participation, interviews, surveys, interaction with others and reflection on discoveries, learners will develop their own worldviews, as well as the skills they require to communicate effectively.

These include: the ability to model, understand, and operate flexibly in the world in any given culture, create one's own appropriate context for living, cross over from one culture to another and become a cultural "shape shifter", learn how to learn, develop tolerance for ambiguity and difference, a strong sense of self and self-reliance, perceptiveness, open-mindedness, empathy, adaptability, flexibility, critical thinking, curiosity and an overall warmth in human relationships and intercultural communication.

The activities described herein are aimed at intermediate and above learners, university students, or learners with work experience. The goals are raising cultural awareness and intercultural communicative competence, developing skills for the negotiation of differences, and responding to unfamiliar or changing contexts.

Rationale

Critical incidents are short dialogues and scenarios that highlight an aspect of intercultural communication which may be unfamiliar or challenging if encountered in the real world. Excluding overt cultural information or references from examples, such as names and nationalities, allows the students to form their own interpretations and evaluate the language and culture of each scenario, independent of preconceptions or stereotypes. This allows free thought and a more complete synthesis of cultural differences and understanding of intercultural communication.

The activities included, aim to engage students with interesting and relevant content, provide opportunities for reflection, critical thinking, evaluation and self-exploration. Exercises and activities build research skills and a sense of curiosity that will motivate and facilitate students in extending their inquiry and interests beyond the classroom. As a predominantly student

centered text, students are expected to provide much of the information and questions steering lessons towards their own goals while the teacher assumes the role of facilitator, guide and mentor.

Method

Once students have processed the information from the critical incident, they should focus on the more difficult *Why* and *How* questions, trying to come up with a basic description of the context involved and a hypothesis which explains the behavior. Based on this, the students can generate questions for discussion or further research.

Critical Incident

Students brainstorm and list experiences or questions they have regarding communicative, intercultural, or general social situations. Examples of culture shock, miscommunication or cross-cultural exchange work best. For lower level students or those without intercultural experiences, teachers can create critical incidents designed specifically for students' needs and contexts.

Analysis

Analyze the situations by applying simple questions. Who is involved? What happened? Where did the situation take place? When? Why was there a difficulty? What was the intended purpose? To develop a complete understanding, learners should compile their own list of key words and key questions about the critical incident.

Reflection and Interpretation

Deconstruct the scenario from the perspective of each participant using simple questions. Form a basic understanding of the social or communicative situation. Try to understand the participant's perspective and create a sense of empathy through interpretation. Why did the behavior in question occur? How can the difficulty be overcome? Learners should write down their own interpretations which can be shared and discussed.

Role Play and Discussion

In small groups students can reenact or recreate the critical incident as a role play or dialogue. Each student can assume the role of participant A or B adding conversation and language to the critical incident. Teachers can guide this activity providing information about how scenarios may be communicated in real life. This performance can be used for discussion or analysis to develop a deeper understanding of the context and behavior in question. This activity also allows students to consider a communicative situation and apply their knowledge and experience of language and culture to solving or completing a task, scenario or problem. Students are also directly in control as they collaborate to creatively design, produce and perform a dialogue in small groups or in front of the whole class. Role play performance makes it possible for students to put their

own culture and personality into the learning process, helping them synthesize concepts, and establish meaningful and relevant connections.

Notes

1. These materials can be modified for different levels of English proficiency by changing the text and the characters who talk to one another.
2. In larger classes they can be conducted as pair or group work.
3. If learners find it difficult to identify with the critical incident, use a simple example from their immediate context. A highly relevant or familiar situation which they may have all experienced or has an obvious interpretation would work best.
4. Students should be told to keep an open mind and pay close attention to all details.

References and Further Reading

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Appendix

Critical Incident Interpretation and Analysis

Read and explain what you think is happening in the following situations.

1) <i>A</i> and <i>B</i> are in an important business negotiation and can't reach an agreement. <i>A</i> becomes more tense and serious while <i>B</i> tries to relax. <i>A</i> feels that <i>B</i> is not taking the matter seriously while <i>A</i> feels that <i>B</i> is becoming hostile.
Interpretation
2) <i>A</i> is asked to manage the overseas branch of the company. <i>A</i> finds that a young recruit is working very hard. <i>A</i> decides to reward <i>B</i> with praise in front of all other workers, using <i>B</i> 's first name, but this makes the whole office uneasy.
Interpretation
3) <i>A</i> is visiting a family for a short homestay <i>A</i> is shocked when the host family compliments <i>A</i> on having a tall nose, large eyes and a small face.
Interpretation
4) There is a misunderstanding with the head office and <i>A</i> is asked to call and solve the problem. <i>A</i> negotiates in the home language and everything is easily worked out. However <i>A</i> 's partner <i>B</i> who doesn't speak the home language apologizes to <i>A</i> for causing so much trouble with the boss in the head office.
Interpretation
5) Professor <i>A</i> , who was a guest lecturer at a Foreign University, was surprised that in the class all the boys sat on one side of the room and all the girls sat on the other. <i>A</i> tried to joke about it but received no reaction from the students.
Interpretation
6) <i>A</i> and <i>B</i> were asked by their boss to interview each other. <i>A</i> reported that <i>B</i> was friendly but never gave <i>A</i> the chance to speak whereas <i>B</i> reported that <i>A</i> seemed nice but didn't say very much.
Interpretation
7) <i>A</i> was transferred to the foreign office of the company to train the staff. <i>A</i> felt very uncomfortable that the supervisors always stood very close or touched <i>A</i> whenever they spoke. <i>A</i> finally had to resign and transfer back to the home office.
Interpretation

8) *A* and *B* have been friends for a while they often study together and go out for coffee or dinner. One evening after spending the day together, *A* takes *B*'s hand and tries to kiss *B* at the bus stop. *B* is shocked and avoids meeting *A* again.

Interpretation

9) Professor *A* was visiting a University overseas *A* was asked to attend a faculty meeting. *A* was surprised how everyone argued and criticized each other openly. *A* was more shocked that after the meeting everyone became friendly and went out for a drink.

Interpretation

10) After being transferred to the foreign office, *A* was taking the train and suddenly got hungry. *A* had previously bought an apple at a market and took it out and proceeded to bite into it. As *A* did so everyone on the train turned and stared.

Interpretation

11) Professor *A* decided to do a debate exercise in a conversation class. *A* is disappointed that none of the students who knew the subject well were willing to give their opinion or challenge the opinions of others.

Interpretation

12) *A* starts working for a small conversation school. *A* notices there is a computer in the entrance for students to use. When *A* has time between classes *A* uses the computer to check email. *A* is surprised that one day the computer is suddenly moved into another room where nobody can use it.

Interpretation

13) *A* is asked to do a presentation on *A*'s home town for elementary school students. *A* is shocked when all the students try to shake hands upon entering the class. *A* is further surprised when asked to talk about food.

Interpretation

14) *A* does a student exchange trip and feels very uncomfortable riding the train because everyone stares. *B* who is also a foreign student feels strange because people rarely look at faces directly when they talk or make eye contact in public.

Interpretation

15) *A* and *B* have been dating for almost one year. *A* is frustrated that *B* doesn't like to hold hands or act like a couple in front of *B*'s friends. *A* asks if they can visit *B*'s home town and meet *B*'s parents sometime. When *B* replies that this is probably not a good idea, *A* feels *B* doesn't really like *A* and decides to break up with *B*.

Interpretation

Reflection, Inquiry and Analysis

Who	Who is involved? How many? What are their roles/relationships? Background information.
What	What exchanges, actions and events occur? What type of communication or interaction?
Where	Where does the behavior take place? What is the context and situation?
When	What time, day, season does the behavior occur? What events affect or are affected by it?
Why	What is the purpose of this behavior? Is it conscious, unconscious, planned or spontaneous?
How	How are the actions involved related? What kind of verbal/non-verbal communication is used?

Key Words

Key Questions
