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**CRITICAL INCIDENTS FOR INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION – DEVELOPING
INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE USING THE CRITICAL
INCIDENTS METHOD IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING**

Starting with definitions of culture, communication and intercultural competence, the essay presents and discusses the use of “critical incidents” in foreign language teaching to foster intercultural competence and intercultural learning.

Key words: critical incidents, intercultural learning, communicative competence, national culture, intercultural communication.

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**КРИТИЧЕСКИЕ ИНЦИДЕНТЫ ДЛЯ МЕЖКУЛЬТУРНОЙ КОММУНИКАЦИИ –
РАЗВИТИЕ МЕЖКУЛЬТУРНОЙ КОММУНИКАТИВНОЙ КОМПЕТЕНЦИИ
С ИСПОЛЬЗОВАНИЕМ МЕТОДА КРИТИЧЕСКИХ ИНЦИДЕНТОВ
В ОБУЧЕНИИ ИНОСТРАННОМУ ЯЗЫКУ**

Начиная с определений культуры, коммуникации и межкультурной компетенции, в статье представлено и обсуждается использование «критических инцидентов» в обучении иностранным языкам для развития межкультурной компетенции и межкультурного обучения.

Ключевые слова: критические инциденты, межкультурное обучение, коммуникативная компетентность, национальная культура, межкультурная коммуникация.

Since at least the 1990s, the concept of “Intercultural Competence” has been widely used in the field of Educational Science and Foreign Language Teaching (12, P. 196). By shifting the focus away from communicative competence, which refers to a person’s ability communicate linguistically in appropriate ways, the term ‘*intercultural*’ communicative competence adds a further meaning, which is “the ability of a person to behave adequately in a flexible manner when confronted with actions, attitudes and expectations of representatives of foreign cultures” (14, P. 138). As a result, successful communication in an intercultural setting requires not only knowing *what* to say (lexis) and *how* (grammar), but also *when* (in which situation), *why* and to *whom* (2, P. 5). It can thereby be defined as the ability to develop the needed knowledge and skills to successfully communicate with individuals and groups who have another cultural background (15, P. 272). As globalisation has grown due to developments in transportation and communication technology, communication often takes place in intercultural contexts.

Lüsebrink (11, P. 36) defined intercultural communication processes as hermeneutic actions of both the sender and receiver of verbal and nonverbal coded messages. These processes are successful, if the receiver understands the sender’s intended message and, vice versa, the sender understands the receiver’s feedback respectively the answer. However, the possibilities of misunderstanding in an intercultural communication process are manifold. This is partly because non-verbal signals such as gestures, facial expression and body language used in a specific situational context differ considerably between cultures. However, the lack of mutual understanding in a certain intercultural communication situation is also based upon different cultural standards. Hofstede (10), Thomas (17), Maletzke (13) and Hall (6), among others, have described characteristics, which can be used to distinguish cultures: orientation to self (individualism/collectivism), orientation to time (monochronic, polychronic), orientation to power (high power and low power distance), communication (direct, indirect, low-context, high-context.)

Even more elaborated than the characteristics above is the concept of culture itself. There are numerous definitions of culture. Very broadly, culture can be defined as a system of norms and values within groups of people, which can become visible through behaviour as well as the production of material and intellectual products (4, P. 20). It is important to note that cultures should not be considered as homogenous stable constructions. More accurately, they should be characterised as dynamic, hybrid and constantly changing. Additionally, a German atheist from a rural area in Eastern Germany might have slightly different values and behaviour than a German Catholic from Munich or a German Muslim, whose parents immigrated to Germany from Turkey during the 1960s. However, there is something which unites them: they all might share a certain German *national culture* and on the contrary they might feel alien as expatriates in other national cultures or could even experience a *culture shock* while living in another country. National culture can therefore be described as a sphere of cohesion, in which there exist a shared feeling of “normality” among its members, despite the fact, that these members are individuals with their own values, beliefs and opinions.

Klaus-Peter Hansen defines national culture as “cement” that consists of a common language, history, standards and institutions (7, P. 319). It is, however, crucial to note that, although language and culture have been sometimes identified as synonyms (16), culture is deeply embedded in language, as Brown (1, P. 177) puts it: “A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture”. This is the reason why a communication situation between a Brazilian and a Portuguese can be called ‘intercultural’, although they both can speak Portuguese.

Misunderstandings in intercultural contexts cannot be fully avoided. However, a deep knowledge about the respective national cultures can help language learners to prevent some of them. Therefore, working with *Critical Incidents (CIs)* is one method for teachers to foster intercultural competence of their students. CIs briefly describe concrete situations “in which a misunderstanding, problem or conflict arises due to cultural differences between the interacting people” (9, P. 1). These situations can be operationalized for intercultural learning. By describing and interpreting them, language learners can on the one hand reflect about their own national cultures and on the other hand can elaborate on the cultural standards of their target language.

The example of a CI can be either presented by the teacher or even created by the students themselves. Therefore, students can be asked to think about a cultural mishap they have experienced. The advantage of the latter type is that these CIs are “personal, authentic encounters, often emotionally charged, and highly relevant to the specific situation in which the student finds him or herself” (3, P. 53). Alternatively, especially if the students face problems thinking about a suitable situation, the teachers can prepare suitable CIs as well. In any case, the CI should be entirely descriptive: What has happened? Who was involved? How people reacted? However, the question *why* something occurred or happened should be avoided. Rather, students should continuously work on feasible explanations for the described incident. Instead of directly guiding the students to the right answer, this process should be as open as possible: “Instead of pointing students to a right answer, the CI method invites students to explore, discuss and evaluate possible interpretations that bring their own cultural assumptions, values and practises to light” (Ibid, P. 54).

Based on the approach of Gundula Gwenn Hiller (9, P. 3), CIs that can be operationalized should meet following criteria:

- a typical everyday situation in which a representative of culture A starts an interaction with a representative culture B;
- this situation turns out to be at least confusing, frustrating or puzzling for at least one of the people involved;
- the misunderstanding could have been prevented if the irritated person had a more precise knowledge about the other person’s cultural background and its implications.

They can originate from personal or experience, media reports, movies, advertisements or scientific literature and so forth. Concerning the form in which the CIs are presented, several approaches are possible: the CI can be formulated as a dialogue in direct speech, case study, article in a newspaper etc. Of course,

it is also possible to create a mix of the forms above – a case study which contains also direct speech for instance.

Generally, the following information should be provided in the CI (5, P. 37):

1. *Description of acting persons* – background information to all acting persons (3–4 persons) should be given (age, occupation, nationality, sex, fictional names etc.) as well as their relation to each other (e.g. friends, colleagues, guests, family members)

2. *Description of context* – information about place and time as well as a description about what is happening or what happened. It is important, as noted above, that the motives of the persons concerning the way they act and react are not specifically disclosed to the students. To reflect and speculate about the acting people in the CI is the task of the students.

The length of the CI should not exceed one page in order to draw the attention of the students to the intercultural problem rather than to grammatical or lexical questions. Otherwise, the students might also understand the CI as a piece of literature and get distracted from the underlying intercultural misunderstanding. To reduce complexity, it is advised to use material that contains only information that is essential for understanding the respective CI.

Afterwards, students reflect on the CI on their own. However, the teacher should actively support this stage through guiding questions that he or she hands out to the students. As Engelking summarises the role of the teaching person: “The teacher acts as facilitator who provides structured prompts that lead the learner to consider the cultural assumptions that underlie their thoughts and reactions to the initial incident, to question the validity of those assumptions, and then propose other possible explanations for the cultural aspects of the incident” (3, P. 54). These questions could be helpful:

– to get a *general overview*: What happened, where and when? Who is acting? What is the problem? How are the people acting? What do they say?

– to *reflect*: What were my immediate thoughts and responses? Have I experienced a similar situation? What irritates me? Which cultural values are involved in this situation?

– to *interpret*: How might person A or B feel? What could be the reasons of A or B for acting in the respective way? How else could I interpret the situation?

– for *changing the perspective*: How does the other person feel in the situation? If I were the other person, how would I react? Which aspects are difficult for me to understand?

For methodological reasons, this step should be guided by the teacher using the *think-pair-share* strategy. Firstly, the students read the CI and think about the guiding questions individually. They should be also advised to write down their thoughts. Secondly, the teacher asks them to pair themselves or to organize in small groups and share their thoughts with each other. Finally, all pairs or groups share their ideas with the entire class. The *think-pair-share* strategy seems feasible for various reasons. Most importantly, perhaps, it can motivate students who otherwise were reluctant to actively participate in the work with CIs. It also assures that different opinions will be formulated. The problem with a “classic” brainstorm in class could be that, due to group dynamics, some interpretations, which might considerably differ from the other formulated interpretations, are ruled out instantly. A student might even withdraw from formulating his or her ideas if he or she recognizes that all the others interpret the CI differently. However, speaking of CIs, it is of utmost importance to have a wide spectrum of possible interpretations – the collection of ideas should be as unrestricted as possible.

Accordingly, most researchers argue that the teacher should withstand the temptation to finally hand out an “ideal” interpretation of the CI to the students in order to prevent frustration among students for not finding the “right” answer (5, P. 40; 3, P. 54). However, this aspect depends on the learning culture of the students. It can be the case that they expect the teacher to “solve the puzzle”. Hans Jürgen Heringer (8, P. 77), for instance, does incorporate a final solution in his approach of working with CIs.

Besides the outlined advantages of the CI method, this approach also faces criticism. A practical argument against it is the lack of material in the target language as well as a lack of time if the curriculum

prioritizes courses with a genuine linguistic content (3, P. 48). A more theoretical argument is the manifestation of stereotypes through CIs. Following this argument, CIs tend to be even a self-fulfilling prophecy: students or teachers create CIs framed by clichés and explain them using these clichés. To avoid that, CIs should be based on real experiences or real cases read in media reports. In defence of the CI method, it is also important to note that stereotypes are also generalizations and thereby statements about the likelihood of things rather than statements of certainty.

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