Integrating Critical Incidents in the Language Classroom

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Abstract

Over the course of the years, educators around the globe have come to agree that communication in a foreign language requires more than just linguistic skills. Teaching skills such as critical thinking and cultural awareness have become essential to nurture intercultural speakers. However, how can said skills be integrated in the language classroom? This paper aims to offer insights into the use of the Critical Incident Technique (CIT), a narration-based activity often used in intercultural communication classes and workshops. The paper will first explain the origin of CIT and its importance in the language classroom. Subsequently, the author will explain how to create an original critical incident, and finally how to effectively conduct the activity in the classroom. This paper aims to be a practical guide to the creation and appropriate use of CIT, ultimately assisting teachers on how to nurture intercultural speakers.

INTRODUCTION

In the late 20th century, Bennett (1997) coined the term "fluent fool," claiming that in order to avoid becoming someone who can speak the target language

fluently but cannot communicate appropriately, people "need to understand more completely the cultural dimension of language" (Bennett, 1997, p. 16). In other words, in order to effectively communicate in the second language, one must also be aware of the cultural elements that are ingrained in the language use itself. More specifically, an intercultural speaker should possess the intercultural competence (IC) which will allow her/him to avoid misunderstandings and stereotyping. To this day, there is no one absolute definition for IC. However, the most widely recognized definitions include the ones by Byram (1997), who states that "Intercultural Communicative Competence is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of contexts" and Deardorff (2006), who adds that said ability is "..based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (p. 247). In her Process Model of Intercultural Competence, Deardorff (2016) further explains knowledge as cultural self-awareness and cultural understanding of world views; skills as observation, evaluation, analysis, interpreting, and relating; and attitudes as respect, curiosity, and discovery.

As the world evolves to become more globalized every day, the necessity for intercultural speakers grows, and the responsibility lies on the teachers in the language classroom. Seminal researchers such as Byram (1997, 1999, 2002, 2003), Fantini (1995, 2006, 2012), and Deardorff (2006, 2010, 2011, 2016) have frequently underlined the importance of the intercultural dimension in language teaching, leading to increasing awareness among language educators. Over time, a variety of activities have been introduced in classes and workshops specifically tailored to increase IC. However, language teachers who are new to promoting IC in their classrooms might find themselves unsure on which activities to choose and how to carry them out appropriately. As a result, an activity such as the Critical Incident Technique (CIT), which can be created by anyone and integrated alongside one's original curriculum, would be most beneficial. As a matter of fact, the author has been using the technique in several of her classes

at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies, ranging from academic writing courses to communication-based courses.

CRITICAL INCIDENTS LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the years, numerous techniques have been developed to help increase learners' cultural awareness and critical thinking skills. One example is that of the CIT, originally developed in the 1950s by psychologist John Flanagan. Flanagan (1954) describes the CIT as "a set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behavior in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles" (p. 327). In intercultural communication, CIT was adopted, adapted, and promoted by several seminal researchers such as Hughes (1986) and Thomas (1996, 2000, 2010) for language classroom use. Hughes (1986), who gives it the name *culture assimilator*, defines it as "a brief description of a critical incident of crosscultural interaction that would probably be misunderstood by the students" (p. 167). After introducing short stories illustrating a cultural situation, often a misunderstanding, learners are encouraged to discuss and offer interpretations, explanations, and possible solutions to the situation.

While in psychology, its main focus lies on identifying human behaviors, Spencer-Oatey and Harsch (2016) state that employing CIT for the purpose of intercultural communication leads to the emergence of four main focus areas:

(1) Identification of cultural values/standards,

(2) Insights into cross-cultural transitions/adaptation,

(3) Insights into intercultural interaction,

(4) Development and evaluation of training resources. (p. 225)

In a way, CIT "encourages participants to tell their story" (Urquhart et al., 2003) as it requires learners to share their thoughts and experiences in order to work towards understanding unfamiliar ideas and situations. Through the use of both the original narration and student narratives, students acquire new perspectives

and foster each other's intercultural development. After all, "narratives mediate making sense of the self and life events" (Noels et al., 2012, p. 55). Essentially, the CIT in the language classroom can be described as a narrative activity which begins with realistic scenarios of intercultural exchange, triggers pertinent stories from the audience, and ends with learners' newly-gained understanding of themselves as well as of the stories it began with. Through the CIT activity, learners can go through the processes of developing critical thinking, acquiring different perspectives, and increasing cultural awareness. Despite its multiple focus areas, teachers must "think through how the CIT may be interpreted and applied most appropriately for their own particular research" (Chell, 1998, as cited in Spencer-Oatey & Harsch, 2016, p. 224). As such, teachers can benefit greatly from CIT as long as they are aware of their reasons for adopting this technique.

A GUIDE TO MAKING ORIGINAL CRITICAL INCIDENTS

Critical incidents are often presented in the form of short stories depicting cultural misunderstandings which learners are often unfamiliar with. When creating one's own critical incident, there are numerous sources which one might use as reference: (1) One's own experience. Humans are social beings, meaning that people communicate almost every day. When one finds oneself communicating with someone from a different background, intercultural communication is bound to take place. Therefore, said instances of intercultural communication can provide the basis for one's own critical incident; (2) Someone else's experience. Including family, friends, and acquaintances, everyone has stories. Among those stories, one can always find some which can be great examples for learners to reflect upon; (3) News from a reliable source; (4) Popular stories which learners are already familiar with, presented from a different perspective. Hollywood has recently adopted a similar strategy with films such as "Joker" and "Maleficent", offering the audience a chance to see the perspective of the villain. The same can

be applied to critical incidents to provide learners with an opportunity to reflect on a familiar situation from a new angle.

However, something to take into consideration when creating an original critical incident is research. Special care must be taken especially if the incident is not based on one's personal experience, and it is therefore essential to follow up with appropriate research. Creating a story which one has not experienced about a culture which one does not identify with, might in fact generate unnecessary generalizations and stereotypes. Moreover, depending on the course and the level of the students, teachers might also need to prepare a vocabulary list to help students fully understand the critical incident/s and at the same time be able to successfully express their opinions in the target language.

As far as the author is aware, there is no specific format for critical incidents, which implicates that whether the critical incident is presented as text or as an illustration, it is to the discretion of the teacher. The author believes that the choice should be made depending on the audience and/or on the purpose of the activity, rather than adhering to one style each time for the sake of consistency. Figure 1 below is an example of critical incident in written form.

Incident 1

Olivia and Eddie are exchange students at the University of California.

Olivia: *Where are you from?*
Eddie: *I'm from Australia. And you?*
Olivia: *Me too! But, where are you really from? Where is your family from?*
Eddie: *Well, my parents are both South-Korean, but I was born in Australia.*
Olivia: *Korea? Oh my god, I love K-pop. Do you know BTS? They are my favorite band!*
Eddie: *Sorry...I don't know anything about K-pop.*
Olivia: *Are you sure you're Korean? Hahaha.*
Eddie: *Do you have any kangaroos in your back garden?*
Olivia: *Kangaroos? No, I don't.*
Eddie: *Are you sure you're Australian?*

Figure 1. Example of written critical incident created by the author.

Figure 2 below, on the other hand, provides an example of critical incident in the form of illustration.

Incident 1

Figure 2. Example of illustrated critical incident created by the author.

Once the critical incident, in whichever form, has been created, it must be properly conducted in the classroom.

A GUIDE TO CONDUCTING CIT IN THE CLASSROOM

As any activity, it would be wise to first explain the purpose of critical incidents when introducing the activity to learners, along with the concepts of "critical thinking" and "cultural awareness". Once learners are aware of the purpose of the activity, they proceed to read the incident/s before continuing on to the follow-up discussion.

Critical incidents should always be accompanied by a series of questions,

since the follow-up discussion is where learners really have a chance to share perspectives and learn. The focus of the follow-up discussion should cover the following:

(1) Analysis of the critical incident ("What do you think is happening/ happened?")

(2) Evaluation of the incident ("Who was at fault? Why?")

(3) Sharing how one would behave if involved in a similar incident

(4) Sharing one's own experience in relation to a similar incident when possible

The author recommends conducting the activity in small groups, in order to maximize the exchange of narratives, and consequently maximize knowledge acquisition. Following group discussion, the author recommends concluding with a class discussion. Class discussion allows further exchange of opinions, and also offers a chance for the teacher to share his/her opinion or experience if necessary.

Evidently, the discussion aspect of critical incidents makes CIT a worthwhile activity for foreign language classrooms where the main focus is on communication. However, the element of sharing opinions and experiences is an essential element not only for English communication practice, but also to increase learners' IC knowledge. IC recognizes the importance of learners making use of their own cultural background in conversation, as through a narrative of their experiences, learners can exchange new knowledge and perspectives with peers. Moreover, the narrative aspect of CIT allows it to be adequately integrated in writing classes, where students can be asked to write their thoughts and experiences and share them instead of openly discussing in conversation, resulting in students contributing their stories to an ever-expanding library of critical incidents.

CONCLUSION

As stated in the abstract, this research aimed to bring awareness to the employment of CIT in the language classroom. The purpose of language learning is that of communication, and in order to avoid becoming a fluent fool (Bennett, 1997), teachers should encourage language learners to acquire IC. The employment of an IC-approach might be difficult for some teachers, depending on their teaching contexts and curriculums. However, the benefit of an activity such as the CIT is that it can be integrated in any language classroom without having to make substantial changes to the curriculum. Critical incidents can be easily created and integrated alongside the original course material. For the teachers and researchers interested in integrating CIT in their classrooms, one need not look further than one's own experience to create a short narrative which can stimulate learners to engage in discussion. As long as teachers are clear about the goals which they hope to achieve by integrating the CIT, learners will be able to benefit from the activity.

With this in mind, there are still limitations to the use of CIT. The first limitation is that any critical incident which is not based on one's own experience, must be supported by research. This might be a limitation for teachers who have a busy schedule. Another limitation is that of the choice of vocabulary. Depending on the teaching context and the level of students, teachers might need to spend some time introducing new vocabulary prior to the CIT in order for students to fully benefit from the narratives. However, aside from the above-mentioned limitations, the CIT remains an invaluable activity to employ in any language classroom to foster learners' intercultural development.

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