

# ENHANCING INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY AND PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS OF LANGUAGE LEARNERS VIA CRITICAL INCIDENTS IN CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION: A CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH

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**Abstract** - This paper describes an action research study which uses critical incidents in a cross-cultural communication course at a university in Vietnam to enhance intercultural sensitivity and problem-solving skills of English learners with a constructivist approach to language learning. The findings show that by actively engaging in the critical incidents the students were able to enhance their intercultural sensitivity about the ways in which different expectations, values, beliefs and behaviours can affect communication across cultures. They were also empowered with a variety of problem-solving skills to deal with cross-cultural misunderstandings in the incidents. The learners also positively evaluated the use of critical incidents as an effective way of cross-cultural learning. The study is expected to be used as a reference for implementing a critical incident-based pedagogy in cross-cultural communication courses.

**Key words** - intercultural sensitivity; problem-solving skills; critical incidents; cross-cultural communication; constructivist.

## 1. Introduction

In the globalization trend, our world has become a 'global village' where intercultural contacts between people from different cultural backgrounds are part of everyday life for many people. The possibilities for intercultural communication have become greater than ever and their benefits are visible in the foreign language classroom (Vogt, 2006). A misunderstanding can easily occur in a cross-cultural encounter when people do not understand each other's cultural values and beliefs. Intercultural sensitivity has become an important goal of foreign language teaching and learning in response to the need for language learners to function effectively in an increasingly multicultural world. This study investigates how language learners understand cross-cultural communication problems in a target community and how they develop intercultural sensitivity and problem-solving skills to solve misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication dilemmas.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Critical incident and its value

A critical incident is a narrative that illustrates a misunderstanding between two or more people from different cultural backgrounds. Educators have used critical incidents as a method for developing learning in a range of professional disciplines such as nursing, education, and social work. In the fields of intercultural and cross-cultural communication, it is a standard training tool (Cushner and Brislin, 1996). Apedaile and Schill (2008) define critical incidents in intercultural communication training as "brief descriptions of situations in which a misunderstanding, problem, or conflict arises as a result of the cultural differences of the interacting parties, or a

problem of cross-cultural adaptation and communication" (p.7). In this study, the students' critical incidents refer to cross-cultural dilemmas in which misunderstandings occur due to different cultural values and beliefs of participants.

Critical incidents can contribute to the development of students' personal learning and growth. Cope and Watts (2000) claim that "critical incidents...accelerated [the] process of learning and growing self-awareness, and therefore often proved to be seminal moments within this process of change (p.113). Tripp (1993) argues that "critical incidents should question the way things normally operate" (p.28). This can make learners think how the participants act or behave in such a way and critically analyze the hidden cross-cultural misunderstandings that occur in cross-cultural communication. The opportunity given to students to think critically and analytically about a cross-cultural dilemma promotes their intercultural sensitivity and fosters their motivation for learning about culture-based behaviour in intercultural communication.

### 2.2. Intercultural sensitivity

Hammer, Bennett and Wiseman (2003) distinguish between "intercultural sensitivity" and "intercultural competence". According to them, the term "intercultural sensitivity" refers to "the ability to discriminate and experience relevant cultural differences", while "intercultural competence" is "the ability to think and act in interculturally appropriate ways" (p.422). In this study, intercultural sensitivity refers to the students' ability to demonstrate their awareness of cultural differences that cause misunderstandings in the critical incidents. Hammer et al. (2003) argue that greater intercultural sensitivity is associated with greater potential for exercising intercultural competence. Intercultural sensitivity is, therefore, essential for language learners to acquire in order to become interculturally competent.

Intercultural sensitivity is a developmental process. Bennett (1993) proposes the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) over a continuum from Denial, Defense and Minimization (ethnocentric stages), to Acceptance, Adaptation and Integration (ethnorelative stages). The model assumes that a person develops his or her competence in intercultural relations as the experience of cultural differences becomes more complex (Vogt, 2006). However, the DMIS gets critics from some scholars. Scarino (2009) argues that the linear progression of the model does not accord with the complexity of the development of intercultural sensitivity; while Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino, and Kohler (2003) claim that the model assumes that language learners have no prior

exposure to issues of intercultural communication. Once learners have acquired intercultural sensitivity, they will be able to avoid stereotypes and make cultural generalizations to deal with intercultural incidents.

### 2.3. Stereotypes and generalizations

According to Levine and Adelman (1993), stereotypes are exaggerated beliefs and images about groups of people which are often based on a lack of information or contact, while generalizations are general beliefs and images about groups of people which are based on some common sources of information. In this study, stereotypes refer to false beliefs about people of the target culture in the critical incidents, while cultural generalizations refer to general beliefs about the target culture that the students need to gain for accurate judgment.

To become interculturally competent, language learners need to use cultural generalizations to predict the outcomes and participants' behaviours in the critical incident. Cultural generalizations can prevent them from falling into cultural stereotypes which usually create a false impression, inaccurate observations and reinforce their cultural biases. Apedaile and Schill (2008) argue that cultural generalizations can provide clues to better understand people's behaviours and actions.

### 3. Methodology

Traditionally, learners are provided with a critical incident that has a number of explanations. They are encouraged to select the one that best explains the misunderstanding and mark their answers with "the best choice", "satisfactory", "less than satisfactory", or "the worst choice" (Cushner and Brislin, 1996). However, such a way to deal with critical incidents may have some negative points as in real life situations there might be more than one explanation that can be considered appropriate or correct. In addition, learners rely too much on the given options for explanations rather than developing their own critical thinking for problem-solving skills. To avoid this drawback, this study adopts a constructivist approach to language learning, which is "a theory about knowledge and learning... [that] defines knowledge as temporary, developmental, socially and culturally mediated..." (Brooks & Brooks, 1993, p vii). The central principles of this approach are that "learning involves an active process in which learners construct meaning by linking new ideas with their existing knowledge." (Naylor & Keogh, 1999, p.93). Applying this concept of the constructivist approach, the participants in this study actively construct meaning by connecting their own ideas with their existing knowledge of cross-cultural communication in the course in dealing with cross-cultural problems in the critical incidents.

To deal with the issues above, the study is aimed at answering the following research questions:

(1) *How do the language learners enhance intercultural sensitivity and problem-solving skills through critical incidents?*

(2) *How do the language learners evaluate the benefits of critical incidents in cross-cultural communication?*

One hundred and twenty third-year students of the English major at a university in Vietnam participated in the study. These students were chosen as they were studying the cross-cultural communication course which the author was teaching. As this study was a kind of action research on the author's own teaching, the participants were not representatives for the whole population. The research instruments for data collection include the critical incidents (CI) created by students' groups, classroom observations and evaluation questionnaire. The criteria for selecting the samples of the students' critical incidents are that they all reflect the topics and the key content of the course including cross-cultural contacts, cross-cultural adjustment process, verbal and non-verbal communication, friendship and acquaintances, family types, educational values, stereotypes and ethnocentric judgments in cross-cultural communication. The samples focus on American culture and the students' native culture, for the course mainly deals with American culture in cross-cultural communication. The samples of critical incidents include the following:

CI#1: Stereotypes about black people

CI#2: Cross-cultural contact with Americans

CI#3: Adjustment process in the American society

CI#4: Communication styles between American and Vietnamese cultures

CI#5: Ethnocentric judgments about American foods

CI#6: Non-verbal communication between American and Vietnamese cultures

CI#7: Socializing with American friends

CI#8: American and Vietnamese perceptions of friendship

CI#9: American and Vietnamese parenting styles

CI#10: American culture of learning

Classroom observations were made by the author to record the students' solutions to the critical incidents. Two groups of learners worked face-to-face in the classroom; one group presented their critical incident, the other group discussed together to work out the cross-cultural misunderstandings in the incident and came up with appropriate solutions to the cross-cultural problems. The students engaged in *What*, *Why* and *How* questions to work out the cross-cultural misunderstanding in each incident based on the cross-cultural values of the selected samples (CI#1-CI#10):

- How did the cross-cultural misunderstanding occur in the incident?

- Why did the participants in the incident act/behave the way they did?

- What cultural values appear to be important in the participants' actions?

- What should have been done to avoid the cross-cultural misunderstanding?

After the students finished their presentations of critical incidents, they were all asked to complete a short evaluation questionnaire which was used to examine how the students evaluated the use of critical incidents in the

course. The questionnaire consisted of ten statements for evaluation on a five-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=neither agree nor disagree; 4=agree; 5=strongly agree) (Table 1). The statements were constructed on the values of critical incidents in cross-cultural communication as described in section 2.

**Table 1.** Students' evaluation questionnaire

No.	Statements for evaluation	Rating scale
1.	I found critical incidents an effective way of learning about other cultures in cross-cultural communication.	1 2 3 4 5
2.	I was able to minimize cultural shock in dealing with other cultures.	1 2 3 4 5
3.	I was able to use cultural generalizations to predict the outcomes and participants' behaviours.	1 2 3 4 5
4.	I was able to cultivate attitudes of curiosity, openness, appreciation and empathy towards other cultures.	1 2 3 4 5
5.	I was able to develop my problem-solving skills.	1 2 3 4 5
6.	I was able to enhance my intercultural sensitivity.	1 2 3 4 5
7.	I was able to mediate between cultures to find the most appropriate way for both cultures.	1 2 3 4 5
8.	I was able to successfully cope with the new intercultural environment.	1 2 3 4 5
9.	I was able to develop my critical thinking skills.	1 2 3 4 5
10.	I was motivated a lot to learn about other cultures.	1 2 3 4 5

For data analysis, the study deals with both qualitative and quantitative approaches due to the nature of the research. The qualitative approach was used to find out the emerging themes of the students' problem-solving strategies as solutions to the critical incidents, while their strategy use was also quantified to illustrate which strategy was used the most. In addition, the quantitative approach with one sample t-test was also applied in the analysis of the students' evaluation questionnaire for the comparison of the means.

## 4. Findings and discussion

### 4.1. Learners' demonstration of intercultural sensitivity and problem-solving skills

From the analysis of the students' solutions to the critical incidents, nine themes have emerged as problem-solving strategies with a total of twenty-three uses as shown in Table 2. The total of uses refers to the number of strategy use by the groups of students when they offered solutions to the critical incidents.

**Table 2.** Problem-solving strategies in students' critical incidents

No.	Problem-solving strategies	Total of uses	Percentage
S1	Consulting people of the target culture for advice	1	4.3%
S2	Making inquiries about unfamiliar situations in the target culture with native speakers	1	4.3%
S3	Using cultural values of the target culture to explain the incident	6	26.1%
S4	Using cultural values of one's home culture to explain the incident	4	17.4%
S5	Suggesting different ways to tackle the incident	1	4.3%

S6	Mediating between the two cultures to reach a cross-cultural perspective	5	21.8%
S7	Raising awareness of cultural differences to minimize cultural shocks	3	13.2%
S8	Avoiding ethnocentric judgments to deal with the incident.	1	4.3%
S9	Avoiding stereotypes to deal with the incident.	1	4.3%
Total		23	100%

(Note: S=Problem-solving strategies)

As can be seen from Table 2, using cultural values of the target culture to explain the incident (S3) is the most important problem-solving strategy which accounts for the highest percentage (26.1%), while using cultural values of one's home culture to explain the incident (S4) is in the third position with 17.4%. It is important for participants in a cross-cultural encounter to contrast cultural values of the target culture with one's home culture so that they can avoid the wrong assumption about the other culture. For example, in the CI#2, privacy and equality are the two important cultural values in the American society, while the concept of these two values is quite different in the Vietnamese culture. For Americans, the emphasis on privacy exists as individuals feel their needs must be respected. The American tendency is to minimize status differences rather than to emphasize them, while there is a hierarchy between the boss and the subordinates at the workplace in Vietnamese culture. Similarly, in the CI#8, the concept of friendship for American people is very different for Vietnamese people in that American people tend not to have a deep friendship with someone unless they feel they are committed to it. In the CI#4, while the American business people actively engaged in the business meeting, their Vietnamese partners tended to wait for their turn. This indicates that American people have a preference for the "high involvement" communication style whereas Vietnamese people are in favour of the "high considerateness" pattern. In the CI#6, American people should not misinterpret the Vietnamese lack of eye contact as a lack of attention or interest because such behaviour can mean respect and deference in a hierarchical culture. Contrasting cultural values of the target culture with the ones of their home culture, the students were able to develop awareness of cultural differences in order to better understand the participants' behaviours in the incident.

The second important problem-solving strategy is to mediate between the two cultures to reach a cross-cultural perspective (S6), which accounts for 21.8%. This strategy is crucial for language learners to become intercultural competent. For example, the CI#9 refers to different parenting styles between an American father and a Vietnamese mother in a cross-cultural family. The students mediated between the American culture and the Vietnamese culture to adopt a cross-cultural perspective that is appropriate for both cultures. For instance, the cross-cultural parents should encourage their children to be independent by themselves even from an early age although they can still take some care of their children.

They should not forbid their children to leave home at 18 years old, but spend time on sharing their experiences about life with their children and give support to them whenever they need. Such a cross-cultural perspective can reconcile cultural differences between the two cultures so that the cross-cultural family can avoid conflicts in parenting and feel happy together.

Raising awareness of cultural differences to minimize cultural shocks (S7) is the fourth important problem-solving strategy with 13.2%. The CI#10 shows that an awareness of independent study and plagiarism in American universities could prevent the Vietnamese student from getting shocked. Especially, this strategy is essential for an individual's adjustment to a new culture. In the CI#3, the Vietnamese girl (Huong) and the Japanese girl (Harumi) went through the same stages from the honeymoon period to culture shocks and initial adjustment when they first arrived in the USA. However, while Harumi fell into depression and then decided to return to Japan, Huong was able to skip the depression stage and moved directly to the final stage of acceptance. By acquiring language and cultural knowledge of the target culture as well as intercultural sensitivity with great effort, Huong successfully integrated into the target culture. This confirms that Bennett (1993)'s DMIS over a linear progression is not realistic. A person's adjustment to a new culture can be different for different people as it depends a lot on their intercultural sensitivity and ability to cope with changes in their life, which can make their adjustment process in the target culture shorter or longer.

The students also used some other problem-solving strategies with equal frequent use (4.3%). For instance, for the CI#8 the students suggested different ways to tackle the incident (S5) via facebook, email or phone calls to get in touch with the American friend who seemed to ignore his two friends. In the CI#5, Minh had difficulty adjusting to the American society because of his ethnocentric judgments about the American foods with which he could not accurately interpret the cultural values and behaviour of his American homestay friend except through his own cultural perspectives. Avoiding ethnocentric judgments (S8) is, therefore, a good strategy to solve cross-cultural misunderstandings. Similarly, the CI#1 shows that stereotypes can be dangerous as they are formed with exaggeration and lack of information or contact about the target people. The stereotype that black people are dishonest people is completely wrong. Avoiding stereotypes (S9) definitely can help solve the false assumptions that the American couple had for the black boy in the incident. Consulting people of the target culture for advice (S1) or making inquiries about unfamiliar situations in the target culture with native speakers (S2) can also be good strategies to use. For the CI#7, such strategies can help the Vietnamese girl avoid embarrassment when her American friend asked about the bill and the shop where she had bought the gift.

In short, the students used a variety of strategies to find out solutions to cross-cultural misunderstandings that occurred in the incidents. Among them, an understanding

of cultural values of the target culture and one's home culture, and the ability to mediate between cultures are the most important strategies to deal with the cross-cultural problems in the incidents.

#### 4.2. Learners' evaluation of critical incidents

Apart from the students' participation in solving the cross-cultural misunderstandings in the critical incidents, they also positively evaluated the use of this technique in the course (Table 3).

The results in Table 3 show that the majority of students agreed that critical incidents can help them enhance their intercultural sensitivity with the highest mean ( $M=4.43$ ,  $SD=.589$ ,  $t=26.489$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), followed closely by problem-solving skills ( $M=4.41$ ,  $SD=.494$ ,  $t=31.256$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). This shows that the students' awareness of cultural differences between cultures enabled them to adopt problem-solving skills to deal with the cross-cultural misunderstandings in the incidents. The students were also able to use cultural generalizations, rather than stereotypes, to predict the participants' behaviours ( $M=4.18$ ,  $SD=.496$ ,  $t=25.929$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) so that they could understand what caused the misunderstanding in the incident. The students found critical incidents an effective way of learning about other cultures in cross-cultural communication ( $M=4.38$ ,  $SD=.522$ ,  $t=29.056$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) and this technique made them feel more motivated in cross-cultural learning ( $M=4.08$ ,  $SD=.656$ ,  $t=18.098$ ,  $p<0.05$ ).

Moreover, the students were also able to cultivate positive attitudes towards other cultures as they became more open, sympathetic and appreciative of cultural values in other cultures ( $M=4.23$ ,  $SD=.498$ ,  $t=27.151$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). Such positive attitudes were essential for them to decentre from their own culture and mediate between cultures to find appropriate ways for both cultures ( $M=4.20$ ,  $SD=.422$ ,  $t=31.144$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). This is the evidence of the students' acquisition of intercultural competence through critical incidents. Being interculturally competent, the students were able to cope with the new intercultural environment successfully ( $M=3.88$ ,  $SD=.700$ ,  $t=13.817$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). Finally, through critical incidents, the students were also able to develop critical thinking skills ( $M=3.86$ ,  $SD=.598$ ,  $t=15.717$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) and minimize cultural shock to deal with other cultures ( $M=3.80$ ,  $SD=.616$ ,  $t=14.220$ ,  $p<0.05$ ).

**Table 3.** Learners' evaluation of critical incidents

Learners' evaluation	N	M	S.D.	t	p*
1. I was able to enhance my intercultural sensitivity.	120	4.43	.589	26.489	.000
2. I was able to develop my problem-solving skills.	120	4.41	.494	31.256	.000
3. I found critical incidents an effective way of learning about other cultures in cross-cultural communication.	120	4.38	.522	29.056	.000
4. I was able to cultivate attitudes of curiosity, openness, appreciation and empathy towards other cultures.	120	4.23	.498	27.151	.000
5. I was able to mediate between cultures to find the most appropriate way for both cultures.	120	4.20	.422	31.144	.000
6. I was able to use cultural generalizations to predict the outcomes	120	4.18	.496	25.929	.000

and participants' behaviours.					
7. I was motivated a lot to learn about other cultures.	120	4.08	.656	18.098	.000
8. I was able to successfully cope with the new intercultural environment.	120	3.88	.700	13.817	.000
9. I was able to develop my critical thinking skills.	120	3.86	.598	15.717	.000
10. I was able to minimize cultural shock in dealing with other cultures.	120	3.80	.616	14.220	.000

\* Significant at  $p < 0.05$  (N=number of participants, M=Mean, SD=Standard deviation, t=one sample t-test value, p= probability value).

In short, the students positively evaluated the use of critical incidents in the cross-cultural communication course thanks to the benefits they gained. They believed critical incidents an effective way of cross-cultural learning which helped them enhance their intercultural sensitivity, develop their problem-solving skills, adopt positive attitudes and acquire the ability to mediate between cultures to successfully cope with intercultural encounters.

## 5. Conclusions

The study has provided positive findings which show that by actively engaging in the critical incidents the students were empowered with a variety of problem-solving strategies to deal with cross-cultural misunderstandings in the cross-cultural dilemmas. The students positively evaluated the use of critical incidents in the course as an effective way of cross-cultural learning which helped them enhance intercultural sensitivity and problem-solving skills to successfully cope with the new intercultural environment. Adopting the constructivist approach to language learning, the study shows that the students developed a realistic sense of challenges to meet cultural conflicts and tensions in cross-cultural communication dilemmas. The nature of the cross-cultural communication study enabled them to see cross-cultural situations from different perspectives, cultivate attitudes of curiosity, openness, appreciation and empathy towards other cultures, and develop intercultural sensitivity of different cultural values that have an impact on people's behaviours in cross-cultural communication. The study

offered the students valuable opportunities to engage in the target culture through critical incidents at a deeper level while connecting classroom learning to situations that potentially occur in the global community. With intercultural sensitivity and problem-solving skills acquired from critical incidents, language learners are able to become interculturally competent to successfully deal with cross-cultural encounters in reality. With such an outcome of the study, a critical incident-based pedagogy can be beneficial for language learners in a cross-cultural communication course.

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