

## Session Plan: Critical incidents

### Learning outcomes

Theoretical, 2

Interpersonal, 3

This task introduces the critical incident technique that is designed to raise students' awareness and sensitivity to potential intercultural clashes and ability to see intercultural situations in the eyes of the other and to negotiate successful ways of dealing with culture bumps.

### Stage: I

#### Preparation needed

The teacher needs to select an existing example (from the literature or from below) or create one to be discussed first to illustrate the technique. It may enhance discussion if the students are also asked to think about potential critical incidents before class (rather than come up with some ad hoc examples during class).

If put in succession, this session nicely functions as a follow-up for the Iceberg session, but it can also be used independently.

#### Groups

Full class or small groups depending on group size.

#### Time (total suggested time)

60+ minutes

#### Background for lecturer

The term critical incident refers to a communication situation that is considered somehow out of place or unexpected – problematic and confusing, or funny and amusing – by the participants or some of them. In other words, these can be seen as culture bumps in intercultural communication. Although the negative aspects are thus foregrounded, critical incidents can also be moments of unexpected communicative success. Critical incident technique uses short stories that aim to engage the students on a personal and emphatic level to contemplate their attitudes and behaviours in various intercultural situations.

There is a wealth of reading material on critical incidents in intercultural communication. See for example:

Landis, Bennet & Bennet (2004) *Handbook of Intercultural Training*. 3rd ed. Sage, pp. 58-60.

To introduce the concept, the teacher can pick examples from existing materials, or narrate new ones based on their own experiences (the latter may function as a motivator for the students to tell their own stories in return). To enhance relevance for translators in particular, it is preferable to choose examples that explicitly include communicative features such as directness, level of intimacy, politeness strategies etc.

Here's an example of a critical incident related to language usage and communicative styles:

Tanja, a young translation student from rural Finland, was visiting London for the first time. She had just bought a ticket to the underground but had never used the gates (or any underground) before. When she tried to insert her single fare ticket to the intended slot, the machine refused to accept it. This happened repeatedly, and Tanja got more and more anxious and aware of the queue behind her. Finally, in desperation, she cried for help. „How does this machine work?!”, she shouted frantically. Everyone around her turned their gaze away and moved quickly to use the other gates.

Discussion points:

What is happening here? What kinds of issues seem to arise?

Can we find explanations for them? What kinds of misunderstandings take place and why?

Can you imagine yourself in the position of one of these participants? Who? Why? How would you feel?

Who could have behaved differently? How? How would the outcome have been different then?

If this had happened in your own country, would the outcome have been similar? Why/why not?

Task 3 (homework) is optional, and time used for it both at home and in the classroom giving instructions and later feedback on the incidents developed by the students has not been calculated to the overall estimated time. For background, and to give guidance to the students, the teacher may find it useful to read:

Jackson, Jane (2003) Critical incidents across cultures, on LLAS website, available at: <http://www.llas.ac.uk/resources/paper/1426> (viewed 8 March 2013).

## Activities

### 1. Lead-in: a brief introduction of the concept *critical incident*, and a joint discussion of an exemplary case 10-15 minutes

Teacher-led activity.

### 2. A discussion and analysis of students' own experiences, 40+ minutes

Student-centred activity. Students are encouraged to think back at their own intercultural experiences in the critical incident framework, to share these with others, and to discuss these analytically and from the perspectives of all participants in the story. Role-play can also be employed. If this is done in small groups, one incident can be picked up for a shared discussion at the end.

### 3. Homework, 60 minutes (optional)

Independent work. Write up and analyse a critical incident based on your own experience (e.g. one that was discussed in task 2) or a situation you have heard of.

## Adaptations for an integrated approach

This material can be used as such as a part of a translation course as well. However, it may prove more fruitful for a translation class to discuss critical incidents in actual translations. This would require the teacher to collect suitable examples in the language pair in advance. Some well-known (true or fictional) translation blunders are repeated on internet sites (see e.g. <http://www.deseretnews.com/top/337/7/Google-Translate-Top-10-translation-blunders.html>), and students can also be asked to crowdsource examples for the class.