

Using Critical Incidents to Teach Cross-cultural Sensitivity

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Rational and Objectives

This is a plan for a lesson on cross-cultural communication for an integrated-skills ESL class. In this lesson the teacher will offer students to work in small groups on several stories of unsuccessful cross-cultural encounters, also known as 'critical incidents' (Cushner & Brislin, 1996). The main objective of the lesson is to raise students' cross-cultural sensitivity as well as to practice four traditional language skills and exercise their critical thinking.

Critical Incidents

A critical incident includes a story about a cross-cultural miscommunication with a subsequent set of questions. Having read the story, students will be asked to choose the best interpretation of the characters' actions based on their knowledge of the characters' cultures. As in real life situations there might be more than one explanation that can be considered appropriate or correct. Students should be invited to discuss their options in small groups and to mark their answers with such words as "the best choice", "satisfactory", "less than satisfactory", "the worst choice" (Cushner & Brislin, 1996).

Student Level

This lesson will be most successful with mid-intermediate to advanced students.

Learning Environment

The lesson can be taught both in an ESL classroom in an English-speaking country as well as in an EFL environment.

Materials

The two exemplary stories (see Appendix) that are used in this lesson are based upon the recurring cross-cultural situations brought up in ESL college-level classes by Japanese and Russian students at a university in Massachusetts. For this lesson to be successfully taught, students should possess at least some basic knowledge of Japanese and Russian cultures. Alternatively, students from these two cultures can serve as cultural informants to other students in the classroom.

Lesson Activities

1. Students are introduced to the notion of cross-cultural misunderstanding. It is best to illustrate this concept with examples from cultures that are familiar to students.
2. If necessary, the teacher can review vocabulary used to describe feelings of excitement, confusion, and annoyance. This can be done in two ways depending on the proficiency level of the students: the teacher can either present these vocabulary items or ask students to

volunteer the expressions that they already know and then add new ones to the student-generated list.

3. Students are divided into two small groups and are provided with one story per group to read and discuss. They are also asked to rate the suggested interpretations of the story. As a way to reinforce new vocabulary, students might be required to underline new vocabulary items in the texts and to be ready to explain their meaning.
4. Students are asked to exchange stories and their ratings of the suggested interpretations. Either a teacher or a student from the cultures in question can serve as cultural informants to settle down possible arguments. If necessary, students might be asked to provide explanations of the new vocabulary items.
5. Students are asked to brainstorm about their own stories of cross-cultural miscommunication and its possible interpretations.
6. As homework, students are asked to come up with their own critical incident(s) to share in class. In the integrated-skills classroom, students should be asked to turn in a written version of the story as well as to present it orally.

Reflections

To adapt to the specific needs of their students, teachers may also incorporate other stories into the suggested critical incident format. To do this, teachers can either use stories of cross-cultural miscommunication that they might have heard of from their students or describe the situations that they have experienced themselves. If they choose to do so, teachers should be cautious about stereotyping and reinforcing misrepresentations about people from other cultures. To avoid this dangerous pitfall, teachers are encouraged to share their critical incidents with several representatives from the cultures described in their stories prior to sharing them in class.

This lesson as well as the stories produced by students as their homework can serve as a wonderful starting point in the discussion of such important cross-cultural notions as culture shock, acculturation, differences and similarities between students' cultures and the culture of the second language.

Bibliography

Cushner, K. & Brislin, R. (1996). *Intercultural interactions: A practical guide*. London: Sage.

Appendix: Suggested Critical Incidents

A. Japanese and American Cultures: Eating in Class

Junji Edo has just arrived from Japan to begin working on his degree at an American university. Before his arrival to the United States, Junji had read several books about America, its people and its culture. Despite his preparation, however, several confusing and frustrating incidents occurred during his first weeks in the United States.

On Mondays Junji was always very busy. He had classes all day and hardly had any time for lunch. One day he showed up at his history class a couple minutes before it started and told one of his classmates, Julianne, that he was really busy all morning and didn't have time for lunch. The bell rang and the teacher came into the class. Julianne opened her backpack and took out a small bag of potato chips and a can of soda and gave them to Junji. Junji was very surprised and embarrassed. He whispered thank you to his friend and refused the food. Junji was even more bewildered when Julianne took another bag of potato chips and started eating them in class. To Junji's amazement, the teacher did not make any comments on Julianne's behavior and proceeded with the class as usual.

Questions

1. What motivated Junji to act the way he did?
 - A. Junji did not like Julianne as a person and did not want to accept food from her.
 - B. Junji was not used to people sharing food with him.
 - C. Junji considered eating in class disrespectful towards the teacher.
2. What attitudes or values appear to be important in Japanese society based on Junji's actions?
 - A. In Japan, people never share their food with others outside of their family.
 - B. In Japan, eating in the class is impolite and shows disrespect towards a teacher.
 - C. In Japan, women are not allowed to share food with men.
3. Why do you think Julianne behaved the way she did?
 - A. Julianne felt obligated to share her food with Junji.
 - B. Julianne always eats in class.
 - C. Julianne realized that Junji was hungry and was willing to share her food with him.
4. What attitudes or values appear to be important in American society based on Julianne and the teacher's behavior?
 - A. In the United States, having a snack during a class does not mean that students do not respect their teacher. Teachers expect active participation in the class and do not mind students' having small snacks if that makes them more comfortable and willing to engage in classroom work.
 - B. In the United States, it is considered rude not to share food with the people around you.
 - C. In the United States, teachers encourage students to share everything to make them feel more connected to each other and become a unified group of people.
5. What could have been done differently to avoid this cross-cultural misunderstanding?

B. Russian and American Culture: Cheating during a Quiz

Larisa Petrova, a student from Russia, won a scholarship to go to an American university. She was very excited about going to the United States and did a lot of reading about American culture. Before her arrival to the United States, Larisa had read several books about America, its people and its culture. Despite her preparation, however, several confusing and frustrating incidents occurred during her first weeks in the United States.

Larisa stayed up all night long writing a term paper for her psychology class. Next morning, during her Spanish class the teacher unexpectedly announced that they were going to have a pop quiz on the material they covered in the last two classes. Larisa was afraid that she was going to fail it as she neither did her homework nor reviewed the material from the previous class. Bill, Larisa's friend from the tennis club and also a classmate in Spanish, seemed to be unconcerned about the quiz. During the quiz, Larisa was asking Bill for the answers to the questions she was not sure of. However, Bill seemed to be annoyed by her questions and did not want to share his answers. Larisa's feelings were hurt. To make the matter worse, the teacher, having seen what Larisa was doing, asked her to hand in her incomplete test and to leave the class.

Questions

1. What motivated Larisa to act the way she did?
 - A. Larisa expected Bill to help her out during the quiz because she considered him her friend.
 - B. Larisa wanted Bill to help her with the quiz because she was selfish and wanted to get a good grade no matter what.
 - C. Larisa expected Bill to help her out during the test because she was a woman.
2. What attitudes or values appear to be important in Russian society based on Larisa's actions?
 - A. In Russia, friends are supposed to stick together in their battle against authority. Teachers are considered to be such authority.
 - B. In Russia, men are supposed to help women in all situations.
 - C. In Russia, students always work on their tests and quizzes together as a team.
3. Why do you think Bill behaved the way he did?
 - A. Bill did not want to help Larisa because he considered her as competition in his

- Spanish class.
- o B. Bill did not like Larisa as a person and did not want to help her out during the quiz.
 - o C. Bill liked Larisa as a person but did not want to help her cheat on the quiz as he considered it morally wrong.
4. What attitudes or values appear to be important in American society based on Bill and the teacher's behavior?
- o A. In the United States, it is considered unacceptable to ask for help.
 - o B. In the United States, students never help each other in class no matter how much they like each other.
 - o C. In the United States, cheating on tests is considered unacceptable and wrong. It may lead to academic dismissal. Students are supposed to get grades for what they know and not what they have copied from someone else's paper.
5. What could have been done differently to avoid this cross-cultural misunderstanding?

Answer Keys

- Critical Incident A
 - 1. C
 - 2. B
 - 3. C
 - 4. A
 - 5. Answers will vary.
- Critical Incident B
 - 1. A
 - 2. A
 - 3. C
 - 4. C
 - 5. Answers will vary.