

# Teaching Intercultural Competence Using Critical Incident and Cultural Story Telling

LIU Sha

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

Intercultural literacy is attached increasingly great importance in this interconnected world. People from diversified cultural backgrounds need to interact with each other for various purposes. Schools and organizations offer courses to improve people's intercultural competence. This paper examines two effective techniques to teach intercultural competence in the classroom setting: critical incident activity and cultural story telling. These two strategies can help achieve the desired objectives of Michael Byram's intercultural communication model.

*Keywords:* intercultural communication, intercultural teaching, critical incidents, cultural story telling

## Introduction

The essence of foreign language education is intercultural education (Zhang & Wu, 2022). Intercultural competence teaching, which integrates linguistic competence and intercultural communication competence, emphasizes both teaching linguistic knowledge and developing intercultural communication abilities. It helps improve the learners' self-awareness of their own cultural identity and enhance their abilities to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds. Intercultural competence teaching is increasingly important given that the world is getting smaller and smaller and the globalization is getting stronger and stronger and people find themselves in greater need to communicate across linguistic and cultural boundaries. The educators and educational policy-makers in the international community are well aware of the urgency to train cross-cultural communicators.

The *Guidelines on College English Teaching* issued by the Chinese Ministry of Education states that "the goal of college English teaching is to develop students' ability to use English, enhance their intercultural communication awareness and ability, and improve their comprehensive cultural literacy" (Wang, 2016). Intercultural competence education has been incorporated into China's foreign language education at all levels.

In this uncertain post-pandemic world of ours, learning to live together is explicitly more and more necessary to maintain a peaceful and harmonious international community. Here is where intercultural competence teaching comes into the picture: to educate students so that they become citizens who are inclusive and able to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds in an appropriate way.

## Components of Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence involves the ability to understand and appreciate cultural differences and to communicate effectively with people from diverse backgrounds. To decide how to teach intercultural

communication effectively, we need to know what is included in it, in other words, what the educators should teach. Byram's intercultural competence model is a useful framework for understanding the components of intercultural competence and how they can be developed through teaching and learning. The model proposed by Byram (2022, pp. 84-90) comprised five aspects of interaction across frontiers of different countries: knowledge, attitudes, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness.

### **Attitudes**

Curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own (Byram, 2022, p. 62): This component involves the way people look at the "cultural meanings, beliefs, values, and behaviors" in other cultures (Byram, 2022, p. 44) which are different from their own. The learners should not judge other cultures as inferior or wrong just because they are different. They actually need to shift their frame of reference before evaluating the differences.

### **Knowledge**

Specific knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general knowledge of processes of societal and individual interaction (Byram, 2022, p. 63): Effective intercultural communicators need to know their own culture well, especially the part hidden from them "beneath the water". Also, they need to be equipped with the same cultural knowledge in their interlocutors' cultures. Knowledge about differences in communication styles in both cultures is also important to guarantee a successful intercultural communication.

### **Skills of Interpreting and Relating**

Abilities to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one's own (Byram, 2022, p. 65): With these skills, people can identify the ethnocentric perspectives in documents of their own culture and other cultures, realizing how the perspectives may cause misunderstandings or conflicts.

### **Skills of Discovery and Interaction**

Abilities to acquire new knowledge of cultural practices and the abilities to operate knowledge, attitudes, and skills under the constraint of real-time communication and interaction (Byram, 2022, p. 65): These skills refer to the abilities to discover knowledge unique to the interlocutor's culture and effectively apply it in actual interaction.

### **Critical Cultural Awareness**

An ability to evaluate critically, and on the basis of an explicit, systematic process of reasoning, values present in one's own and other cultures and countries (Byram, 2022, p. 66): This component means the abilities to make a rational evaluative analysis of one's own culture and other cultures. An individual with critical cultural awareness is able to integrate all the knowledge and skills to act appropriately in an intercultural situation.

The knowledge and abilities aforementioned can be "acquired through experience and reflection" (Byram, 2022, p. 44) and pedagogical intervention. It cannot be denied that most of the learners do not have the opportunities to be immersed in the real interaction, which is the most effective way to learn intercultural competence through experiencing and trial and error. Consequently, educators need to adopt various approaches to teaching intercultural competence in the classroom. Usually, they carry out activities in class to achieve the goal since skills, attitudes, and critical cultural awareness cannot be acquired through listening to lectures. Knowing cultural knowledge alone is not enough to guarantee a successful communication. Awareness can be

enhanced and habits can be cultivated through activities—doing. Among the most commonly used strategies are role plays, critical incident activity, story telling, and ethnographic interviews. This paper will focus on critical incident and story telling, the two techniques adopted by the writer in intercultural competence teaching class.

### **Critical Incident Activity**

The critical incident approach was originally used in intercultural competence training in the 1960s (Wright, 1995). Wight (1995, p. 128) defined critical incidents from a cultural perspective as “brief descriptions of situations in which there is a misunderstanding, problem or conflict arising from cultural differences between interacting parties or where there is a problem of cross-cultural adaptation”. The situation in a critical incident challenges students’ assumptions and stereotypes about other cultures, and creates a learning opportunity for them to develop intercultural skills. The incident may occur in a classroom setting, during a cultural exchange program, or any other intercultural encounter. A typical critical incident begins with a story about a miscommunication between people from different cultural backgrounds, followed by questions that invite the students to give possible interpretation of their behaviors and then suggest solution to the problem. To enlarge students’ cultural knowledge, to cultivate their skills and improve their critical cultural awareness, the writer of this paper modifies the conventional critical incident exercises by incorporating the technique of dramas. It proves to be a very effective and fun teaching technique. The next is a demo of how the technique is carried out in class. First, the students are given a critical incident, e.g.:

Tao teaches English at a university in Shanghai. The College of Foreign Languages she works with offered a short-term exchange program for eight American college students. The day the American students came to Shanghai, Tao, together with two students of hers, went to the airport to pick them up. When they met at the airport, Tao led them to the van she had rented. Then without saying anything, Tao and her students started to move their guests’ baggage into the van. That was a lot of baggage, big and heavy. Suddenly, Tao realized something strange: while they were carrying the large suitcases into the van, the eight Americans stood there, watching and doing nothing. Tao felt a little bit unhappy.

Questions:

1. Why do you think Tao suddenly felt unhappy?
2. Why do you think American students stood there, doing nothing?
3. What do you think can be done to avoid the misunderstanding?

Students are asked to: (a) act out the original “failed” communication in a form of mini-drama; (b) interpret the behaviors of the parties involved; and (c) re-present the situation and this time, one with a successful intercultural communication outcome.

Step 1: Students write a drama based on the information given in the critical incident and then act it out in class. Students can experience the embarrassing, awkward, or uncomfortable scenario by being part of it. They need to identify themselves with the parts they play: the Chinese teacher or American students.

Step 2: With the help of the prompts given in the exercise, the students need to do a little research on their own culture and American culture. It’s time for them to reflect on their own culture, especially the part they may not be conscious of, the implicit part hidden deep down in the water. If they have done enough research or if they are culturally sensitive enough, they may understand the misunderstanding is actually caused by different practices of being polite and the different host-guest relationship in the two cultures concerned (The students may need the teacher’s help if they cannot figure it out). They may realize that in Chinese culture: 1. The hosts are obligated to help their guests. They show their hospitality by giving their guests special treatment; and 2. when

people are offered something, it's polite to refuse it at first and then accept it when offered for the second time. In American culture, however, hosts do not treat their guests differently and the guests do not expect to get special treatment. Besides, because of the individualist culture in America, Americans, who value autonomy and self-reliance, do not expect other people to do things they themselves are supposed to do. So, in this part, "Tao" and "American students" explain why they did what they did. The students may address either to the audience or to each other. This part aims to broaden students' cultural knowledge and enhance their cultural awareness.

Step 3: Students then are asked to do the drama over again, and this time, present a successful and effective intercultural interaction. They are free to decide which party makes adjustment to achieve the desired communicative goals. So, in this new drama, one scenario is that Tao, who knows American values and cultural practices very well, asks the American students if they need her help. If the answer is positive, Tao and her students will then lend a hand with the baggage. If they say no, Tao respects that and lets the American young people do the job themselves. Another option is that the American students adapt themselves to Chinese culture, in other words, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do". Then, the plot will be that they refuse Tao's offer of help politely at first by saying that "Oh, I can handle it myself", but when Tao rebuffs their refusal and insists on helping them with their baggage, they let her do it, but at the same time, they are moving the suitcases together with their Chinese hosts. Consequently, both parties are happy.

In this part, students learn to deal with intercultural interaction in a simulated environment and they learn to shift their frame of reference and this helps cultivate their habit of thinking from a different perspective. At the same time, they realize that both parties in the communication need to negotiate an appropriate solution. That means they need to respect their interlocutor's culture, but they also need to respect their own culture and their own feelings.

Through writing the script of their drama, interpreting two parties' behavior, and pulling off a successful intercultural interaction, the students improve not only their English language competence, but also their intercultural competence. So, the three-step critical incident activity is an effective classroom teaching technique to train intercultural communicators.

### **Cultural Story Telling**

Story telling is another effective classroom teaching strategy used by the writer. The benefits of stories and story telling in education are well recognized. Story telling or writing is a self-reflexive process. Besides, Hall (2005, p. 73) argued that "A narrative always has a point of view, even when that point of view is not obvious". Stories are believed to be especially powerful tools for persuasion. Intercultural competence learning is a self-reflexive and transformative process for students to be more conscious of their own culture and other cultures. That's how stories fit into the bigger picture of intercultural competence teaching.

The cultural story telling exercises are usually assigned to students when they have already learned basic intercultural communication concepts like Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions, high/low context communication systems, ethnocentrism and monochronic/polychronic time, etc. Based on their personal experiences or their knowledge about values, norms, practices in different cultures, and with the intercultural concepts in mind, they, working as groups, write up their own cultural stories. In their stories, characters from different cultural backgrounds interact with each other and misunderstanding or conflicts arise because they lack the necessary cultural knowledge, the right attitude or/and skills. Those who have actual intercultural communication experiences can just base their stories on their encounters with the foreigners, while those who

never interact with people from different cultures can draw on movies, TV series, novels, and Douyin short videos for the raw materials they may use. As far as the writer knows, plenty of Douyin short videos with content of different cultures are available. If the students are sensitive enough and observant enough, they can find what they need.

The following part is taken from the students' cultural story about the life of Xiao Wei, a Chinese exchange student in the United States:

One day, Jane, her new American friend invited her to have dinner at home. Jane's parents received their guest from China warmly. After dinner, Xiao Wei and Jane's family chatted, asking each other questions about their life. Knowing that Alice, Jane's mother, was 65 years old, and she was still working, Xiao Wei asked, "Alice, you are old and why don't you just retire and enjoy your life?" Then, Xiao Wei noticed that Alice suddenly turned displeased. Xiao Wei felt puzzled.

Next, the students need to show their stories in class and analyze their stories using the intercultural concepts they have learned in class. Their performance can be evaluated by their peers. The whole process of the cultural story telling is one for students to reflect on their own culture and acquire new knowledge about different cultures and build new thinking habits and behavioral habits. It's both effective and fun.

### Conclusion

Effective pedagogical strategies can be implemented to teach intercultural competence in classroom. Critical incident activity and cultural story telling activity, the widely accepted techniques, can help facilitate the students' intercultural competence. Through these activities, all the desired objectives put forward by Byram in his model of intercultural competence can be effectively realized, which means the students are more interculturally knowledgeable, and they stop jumping to conclusions; they are better at dealing with people from both their own culture and different cultures.

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