



INTERCULTURALISM IN A TEFL EDUCATIONAL SETTING - A CRITICAL INCIDENT

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Abstract:

This paper explores the concept of interculturalism in a TEFL educational setting by analyzing a critical incident involving a newly arrived Filipino student in a Greek classroom. The study examines the possible causes of the student's communication barriers, including cultural norms, acculturation challenges, and differing expectations of classroom interactions. Drawing on intercultural communication theories (Hall, 1990; Brislin, 1990; Byram, 1989), it highlights the importance of cultural awareness in language education. The paper reflects on how such incidents can serve as catalysts for shifting from a traditional TEFL approach to Teaching English for Intercultural Communication (TEIC) and Teaching English for Multicultural Awareness (TEMA). A series of culturally oriented classroom activities were implemented to foster intercultural sensitivity and enhance students' understanding of cultural diversity. Ultimately, this case study underscores the need for educators to integrate intercultural competencies into language instruction, promoting empathy and effective cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: interculturalism in TESOL, critical incident, cultural awareness in language education, TEMA

1. Introduction

The purpose of this assignment is to explore the notion of interculturalism within a TEFL educational environment by briefly presenting a critical incident taking place in a classroom. The possible reasons for this incident will be investigated, as well as individuals' attitudes towards other cultures. The situation will be examined and evaluated in an attempt to reach conclusions and acquire valuable lessons in order to develop the intercultural competencies of the students and proceed from a mere Teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) approach towards teaching English for Intercultural

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Communication (TEIC) and possibly Teaching English for Multicultural Awareness (TEMA).

2. The critical incident

Lina is an English teacher working in a private institution (frontistirio) in a semi-urban area of a highly touristic Island in Greece. Her class consists of nine students of D' class, all between the ages of 10 and 12 years old. They are all native speakers of the Greek language, although three of them are second-generation children of families descending from Albania and Bulgaria. At the beginning of the school year there is a new addition in class: a teenage boy whose family emigrated from the Philippines for reasons of seeking employment. The new boy, Bill, seems to be competent in communicating in basic English, although his first language is Filipino, and he seems enthusiastic when meeting his classmates asking questions about them and the area, eager to socialize with them. Contrary to that, when talking to the teacher, he is reserved and overly polite, addressing her with the formal title "Professor" while the rest of the kids use "Miss" or "Teacher" when they want to talk in the classroom. He is also silent during the lesson, never asking any questions and seems unwilling to raise his hand in order to provide answers to the exercises done. In an attempt to make sure he grasps the grammatical phenomenon taught that particular day, the teacher asks him if he understood the rules, to which he gives no response, just a note of his head downwards. As his whole demeanor is positive (eyes and mouth wide open, making eye contact), Lina decides to proceed by asking if he wants to start with the first exercise in order to practice the new rules. Bill's response is "Maybe" and then he continues being silent and not offering any further answer. The teacher is baffled but not wanting to put more pressure on the new boy, continues by asking the rest of the students, who are also confused by the former interaction between the new student and herself, but eagerly continue participating in the exercise.

3. Possible explanations for the incident

Since, according to Hall (1959, in Hall, 1990:186) "*culture communication and communication is culture*", the critical incidents (C.I.) in a TESOL classroom are proven to be valuable as they provide various opportunities for learning and growth. Keeping in mind that in an intercultural classroom critical incidents can arise due to differences in language, customs, beliefs and values, what follows is an attempt to list some possible causes for the above misunderstanding.

- A. Bill's attitude might have occurred as a manifestation of his innate shyness and an indication of him being outside of his comfort zone as a newcomer in the classroom.
- B. Bill, as a young teenager, might felt rebellious and unwilling to conform to the teacher's request to provide answers to the question.

- C. He did not understand the grammatical phenomenon and was reluctant to ask for explanations since this would be something that, according to his Filipino culture, would be rude and disrespectful.
- D. He did not understand that it was expected of him to provide an answer due to a lack of comprehension of the language used in this discussion (i.e. English).

Taking all the above into account, it is important to try to avoid reductivism (Fay, 2008). Thinking that the student's behavior is simply rebellious, when he is generally overly polite towards his instructor, sounds rather stereotypical and naive. This might be categorized as essentialism: all teenagers have the same underlying reality and tend to be non-conformists and defiant towards the authority, in our case, the teacher. Similarly, the explanation of not being able to understand the target language and what was asked of him is not justifiable as he has displayed adequate use of the English language while communicating and socializing with his classmates.

Moving forward it is necessary to consider the process of constant cultural shocks the newcomer must have faced during this transitional period of moving and settling into a new country. The experience of this short-term acculturation, since he had been in Greece for merely two months before enrolling in the course, could have easily influenced his personality and the way he expressed himself. According to Brislin (1990), shared patterns of thought and behavior are what constitute the common culture of a group and it is possible that Bill did not have the opportunity to socialize adequately and feel at home with the objective culture of the rest of his peers. As for this, his reluctance to actively participate in the lesson can be explained by the fact that he was still going through the face of cultural adaptation into an unfamiliar cultural context.

Last but not least, the prevalence of large culture is evident in this incident. Bill's national culture can be the culprit behind his unfamiliar behavior in the classroom. Tomalin and Stempleski (1993:5) talked about the importance of "cultural awareness" and specifically awareness of one's culturally induced behavior. After a discussion with the student, it was revealed that the way he conducted himself was heavily influenced by what is considered natural and normal in Filipino culture. As it was explained, Filipinos avoid asking questions when something is not understood and rather open their mouth to indicate the lack of understanding, as this seems more polite and respectful. Similar to this, they try to avoid the word "no" and might choose the word "maybe" accompanied by a jerk of the head down, which signifies the non-verbal sign for "no". Bill's cultural learning process, mainly primary and secondary socialization (Byram, 1989) and the acquisition of the "home" cultural identity and mindset that he carried into a new cultural environment, can explain the misunderstanding and the aforementioned cultural incident.

4. Reflections upon the impact of the critical incident on the approach to teaching

The above critical incident made it abundantly clear that the classroom, as a miniature of the society around us, is an environment highly multicultural and pluralistic regarding the cultural backgrounds of the students. If I, as the teacher, continue to treat the teaching

of the target language mainly as TESOL, not taking into account that nowadays English is the "Lingua Franca", the means of communication between users of multiple cultural origins, it would seem unrealistic and stereotypical. Critical incidents can be the trigger to teach the students the importance of multiculturalism and finally move them from ethnocentrism towards an ethnorelative stance. Since the coursebooks tend to present the dominant cultural perspective (in the case of TEFL, the British or American perspective) with only some highlights of ethnic colours, it dawned on me that education needs to be pluralistic and proceed to become TEIC and possibly TEMA. By recognizing and respecting different cultural perspectives and interpretations, individuals can move towards building greater understanding and empathy across cultures. In this particular class, the soil was fertile for such an endeavor, since there were already four students that came from a different cultural background other than the Greek one.

A powerful tool in my attempt to make sure that no long-term damage was caused to the relationships among my students and a means to map this miscommunication and develop intercultural sensitivity was Baxter's instrument, whose purpose is to enable a consensus of what went wrong and the misunderstanding occurred (Baxter, 1983). Using the summary of the elements in this instrument provided by Fay, a lengthy discussion occurred between me and my students trying to evaluate the roles the individuals played in this incident, the procedure through which we can reach our potential goal, i.e. to expand our perception on multiculturalism and what useful feedback we can accumulate from the interaction between myself and Bill. Possible inferences and assumptions about the attitudes displayed were also analyzed in an attempt to gain insight into the importance of cultural diversity in our classroom (Fay, 2018).

Following the above, culturally oriented activities were sequenced in the classroom to lead the students to a point of intercultural sensitivity development and to acquire the necessary understanding of potential differences and similarities (Peko, Mlinarević, K., & Jindra, I., 2009). The foreign student was initially asked to create a collage that would represent his cultural identity, presenting to his classmates pictures of symbols, food, music and family traditions that are native to his home country. This way, not only the curiosity but the understanding of his fellow classmates was satisfied. Following his presentation, the whole class was assigned to look up different countries and research various cultural aspects such as greetings, food and other foreign traditions. The students were enthusiastic and presented their findings on posters, thus highlighting the cultural aspects they found most intriguing. A fun, interactive form of a cultural journal was made this way, where the students could express their own reflections on the cultural differences or potential similarities they noticed through their research.

5. Conclusion

According to Fitzgerald, "*critical incidents are merely distinct occurrences or events which require some attention, action or explanation; they are situations for which there is a need to attach meaning*" (Fitzgerald, 2000:190), and this can be that they can be an excellent opportunity to develop the intercultural competencies of the students. By means of using the target

language taught in the classroom as a common ground for communication, learners can move from the ethnocentrism that occurred during their phase of enculturation towards ethno-relativism, exploring the other cultures that might be different but equally valid and normal.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

Evangelia Giovanoglou is an English Language teacher. She received a Bachelor's degree in English Language and Literature from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece and a Master's degree from the Hellenic Open University, Greece. She has been active in teaching English as a foreign language in the private sector since 2007. Her current field placement is with the Merchant Marine Academy of Crete, Greece as a visiting professor for the subject of Maritime English. She is interested in intercultural classes and teaching English for Specific Purposes.

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