

# **An Analysis on Understanding intercultural differences and relations and the role of ICTs**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this article is to describe a critical incident based on Wight's description. In the first part, there is a presentation and description of the critical incident that took place in Barcelona, Spain. In the second part, there is an analysis of the possible reasons that led to the particular miscommunication. In the third part, there is reflection, followed by a brief conclusion summarizing the key concepts mentioned earlier.

## **1. Description of the critical incident**

Generally speaking, there are numerous instances where miscommunications and misunderstandings are created among people coming from different countries because of their cultural differences and cultural background. These miscommunications/ misunderstandings are called 'Critical Incidents' (Wight, 1995: 128-130) and they include the whole incident, the participants' possible feelings and reactions. According to McAteer et al (2010: 107), a critical incident makes a person wonder about his assumptions and finally, think in a different way. Their role is crucial as through them, someone can deeply realize what went wrong in his/ her interactions with another person and he/ she can be led to conclusions so as to prevent such kind of miscommunications in the future, recognizing the cultural differences and diversity (Meier, 2014: 154, 155). For the above reason, my personal critical incident will be presented and analyzed, while at same time the possible reasons for these series of miscommunications will be presented.

Last summer, I was hired as an ESL teacher in a 6-week-program in Barcelona, Spain, where I was supposed to teach English to 20 Spanish teenage learners. I was excited about it as that would be an unforgettable experience for me, it would develop me personally and professionally and I also admire the Spanish language that I would use as much as possible before and after classes.

On the first day in class, my students welcomed me, they seemed to be really motivated with our class activities, but they started addressing me in the singular form. I was really confused because in Greece the singular form is not used when a student talks to his teacher, but I thought that maybe because of my friendly behavior and my young age, they felt really close to me and that is why they talked to me like that.

Also, during the lesson as I was trying to see who was present/ absent and learn their names, they insisted on my telling them my second surname, as they all had two, one coming from their father and a second, from their mother. To their great surprise, I confessed having only one, which caused them great curiosity and confusion and they seemed not to believe me.

During the break, I met some Spanish teachers in the school playground and they all hugged and kissed me in both cheeks instead of handshaking. I felt really weird and surprised as I did not expect such as a warm welcome as they were not neither my friends nor my family. I also observed that they all started kissing me first on my left and then on my right side.

After the lesson, two of my colleagues proposed me to meet them at 5 o'clock in order to drink some coffee and take me sightseeing. I was at the meeting point at 5 o'clock sharp, but they weren't. I thought that maybe something was going wrong, but I decided to wait a little bit more. It was half past five when they came and to my great surprise, they seemed to be quite relaxed and they did not seem to apologize. I asked them if I was wrong but they claimed that in Spain when you have an

appointment it is highly recommended to be late at least for a quarter and never be on time like in England and they laughed. So, I realized it was my fault.

After that, we started discussing about our life and job and when I asked them a question about their salary, they seemed really angry and inconvenient. One of them explained to me that it was at least rude asking about money/ salary in Spain but they seemed to understand that I did not know that.

Afterwards, while we were paying, I noticed that they rarely said 'thank you' or 'please', while the waiter was addressing us as 'guapo/ guapa' (beautiful) all the time despite the fact that it was the first time he met us. I was really puzzled with that strange behavior, but I did not say anything else, as I thought it would be once again common in Spain.

## **2. Possible reasons of miscommunication**

After that first day in Spain, I tried to understand the reason why I felt puzzled and I found myself surprised so many times. I was aware that the Spanish people are friendly and polite, but it was difficult to me to explain all that weird 'behavior'.

First of all, in Spain students address their teachers in the same way they address their families. So, that was the reason why they talked to me in the singular instead of the plural form every day.

Additionally, every person with Spanish nationality has two surnames, one coming from his/her dad and a second, from his/ her mum. So, that's why they could not believe that I had only one surname, when they asked me.

Concerning the way my colleagues greeted me for the first time (kiss and hugs), it is common in Spain to kiss and hug someone you meet for the first time instead of handshaking that Greek people tend to use in Greece. This is a polite and warm way for them to welcome someone, while they always start kissing someone from the left cheek and then they move to the right one. It is also worth mentioning, that they actually do not kiss anyone, but rather touch their right cheeks and make a kissing sound.

Regarding the question I posed about their salary, they find such questions (money) quite impolite and annoying.

Concerning the time, Spanish people tend to be late in their meetings and appointments and that is the reason why they laughed and made a comment about the British people's punctuality that they do not seem to welcome.

Moreover, it is quite frequent for them to call someone 'beautiful' without actually making a compliment.

Finally, they do not say 'thank you' and 'please' constantly but rather they show their gratitude by using the appropriate tone of voice and talking with a portion of respect to their addressee.

## **3. Reflection**

Taking into consideration the particular critical incident, I realized the need of a critical reflection as it would be a significant way for me in order to recognize the main source of all these misunderstandings, learn how to avoid them in a similar situation in the future and boost my cultural awareness (Engelking, 2018).

Using Baxter's mapping miscommunication instrument (1983), I tried to detect what went wrong in my intercultural interactions with my Spanish colleagues and learners. According to it, despite the fact that our roles (teacher- students) were clear, I did not know how learners address their teachers in the Spanish teaching context. Also, in terms of inference, my Spanish students took for granted that I had two surnames like they did and that is why they could not believe the opposite. Additionally, I should have checked my assumptions about language use in Spain (guapa) before feeling that they did not address me as they should or they were not polite enough (limited use of thanks/ please). Moreover, I felt numerous times uncomfortable and a little bit embarrassed, especially when I asked

about their salary or when I arrived on time in our appointment and they made their comment laughing about the British punctuality. Finally, I realized our cultural differences and I recognized many times that both me and the others were perceiving the rest of their world based on their own culture (Fay, 2008). That was because our group (me -students - colleagues) was heterogeneous, so the group dynamics in this cross-cultural group were quite complex as we did not share the same sociocultural background despite the fact that we respected each other's 'diversity' and 'otherness' (Akkerman et al., 2006). So, that particular period I was at the stage of minimization as I could understand those differences but considered that everyone was the same with the rest (Apedaile & Schill, 2008). Also, I always took for granted that my country's habits, lifestyle and culture was the right one and that is the reason why I used to compare it with the rest in my attempt to understand.

#### 4. Conclusion

In the particular article, a critical incident was presented and analyzed in an attempt to understand and explain the intercultural differences and relations, raising at the same time my cultural awareness. It is true that after that, I changed quite a lot my way of thinking and I moved from the ethnocentric to the ethnorelative stage (Fay, 2008), which developed me both personally and professionally, dealing multicultural classes with different needs and beliefs.

Finally we underline the importance of the digital technologies in intercultural education domain and language comprehension that is very productive and successful, facilitates and improves the assessment, the intervention and the educational procedures via Mobiles which brings educational activities everywhere [13-21], various ICTs applications which are the core supporters of education [22-58], AI, STEM & ROBOTICS which raise educational procedures into new levers of performance [59-77], and games which transforms the education in a very friendly and enjoyable interaction [78-81]. Additionally the enhancement and combination of ICTs with theories and models of metacognition, mindfulness, meditation and emotional intelligence cultivation [82-127] as well as with environmental factors and nutrition [9-12], accelerates and improves more over the educational practices and results, especially in the intercultural and language comprehension domain and its practices like assessment and intervention.

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