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Critical Incidents in Language Education in Finland: A case study into intercultural knowledge as part of language studies

Riikka Ala-Sankila, Anne Vuokila

1. Introduction

During critical incidents, different cultures come in contact, and something goes wrong. “Critical incidents used in cross-cultural training are 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.” (Wight, 1995, p. 128). The situation can be problematic, confusing or humorous, but the parties involved do not necessarily understand what happened and why. Critical incidents are challenging communication situations, occasions that stay in the mind; situations where cultural differences cause misunderstandings or problems. Critical incidents can be very dramatic, but also experienced on a subconscious level and not necessarily acknowledged by the parties themselves.

In this text we approach critical incidents as a tool in language teaching (e.g., Apedaile and Schill, 2008). Dealing with critical incidents in language teaching provides learners with improved abilities to communicate in intercultural situations as communication is more than just vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. In Finland, language education has been mainly focussed on writing skills and grammar, whereas spoken skills have received less attention. However, spoken skills are relevant in face-to-face situations when people meet, not only from the same culture but from all around the world. Cultural differences appear more in personal encounters, and they may cause various problems, specifically critical incidents. Thus, to enable smooth and effortless communication, cultural knowledge is crucially important.

1.1 Language Education in Finland

Finland is a country of about 5.5 million people, fewer than in some large cities in Europe. The native language of most inhabitants is Finnish, a language that is not widely spoken outside Finland. Thus, knowing foreign languages is crucially important for Finns. This fact has been acknowledged already for decades, and language skills are on a high level.

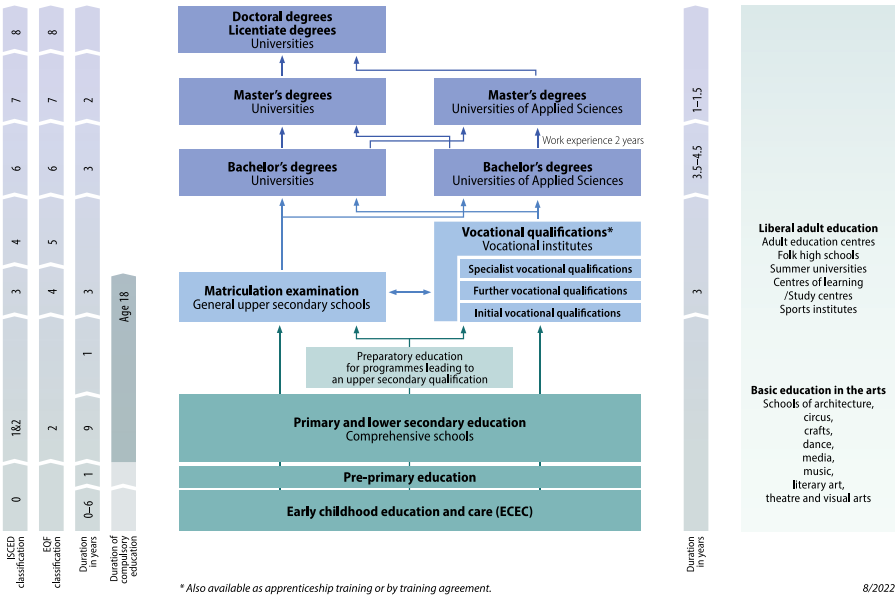
The aim of the Finnish education system (Chart 1) is to provide equal educational opportunities for everyone. This is enabled by free education at every level; and from each level it is possible to continue studies to the next. (Global Education Park Finland, 2017). Education is nowadays compulsory for all children between seven and eighteen years of age. The first level, comprehensive school, lasts for nine years. At the end of comprehensive school, students continue either to general upper secondary education at the end of which they take a national school-leaving examination, matriculation examination or to vocational upper secondary education where they get specialist vocational qualifications. Both upper secondary educations usually take three years.

After graduating from upper secondary education, further studies can be continued either at universities or universities of applied sciences.

In the Finnish education system, children can have different language routes to learn foreign languages in comprehensive and upper secondary schools; they have two compulsory languages, starting usually with English in grade 1, and in addition, they can choose two optional languages. The second compulsory language starts in the 6th grade, and it is the second national language, i.e., Swedish or Finnish. All schools must follow a national curriculum, but the learning content may be tailored according to the local needs. (Inha, K., 2022). Students in higher education are required to show their language ability in Finnish, Swedish and a foreign language, usually English, and to be able to use the language at work, in a field-related context and in international interaction. It is also possible to study more languages, but usually at a beginner level.

Chart 1: Education system in Finland (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2022)

EDUCATION SYSTEM IN FINLAND



In language teaching, attention is paid to both oral and written language. However, grammatically correct written language required in the national matriculation examination dominates language teaching at least in the general upper secondary schools. The testing of oral skills in matriculation examinations has been in planning for many years but is still not in use in general upper secondary schools. When something is not tested in matriculation examinations, it is of less importance. Mere spoken skills are not enough, however, and as Andrew Reimann (2013) stated in his article, being able to imitate the behaviour of, and perform like native speakers may be of limited use. Today's language learners need to have a deeper understanding of

what communication is, and for that they need meta-skills that will assist them when learning about communication and encountering small differences in interaction. They need, according to the author, to learn to be self-confident, open-minded, empathetic and approving so that approaching people coming from different cultures can be seen as an opportunity and not a threat. (Reimann, 2013). In their article, Tran Thien Quynh Tran et al. (2019) note that it is important for language learners to be ready to work in an intercultural world, both at home and abroad, and both employers and teachers, especially in higher education, understand this.

According to the new Finnish language policy, students in their general upper secondary school studies compile a language profile in which they describe, for example, the languages they know, themselves as language learners, and the plans for using languages after general upper secondary school studies. Its purpose is to support the students' growth as language learners and language users in general upper secondary school as well as in further education, some of the topics leading the students to consider how languages and cultures interact and helping them contribute to global communities through work or private life. (Inha et al., 2021). Lower school levels play an important role in recognising if pupils are already introduced to cultural differences and diversities in language education at an earlier age. For language teaching in higher education, it is important to learn about the students' prior knowledge on the topic, and hence to develop the methodology, content and syllabi of language teaching. Language teachers at institutions of higher education may otherwise have a distorted understanding of the learners' level of intercultural awareness, expecting it to be higher based on their own personal experiences, but the level of intercultural knowledge and experiences on intercultural encounters may in fact vary much among the learners.

From the point of view of universities of applied sciences, the aim of the higher education policy in Finland, as given by the Ministry of Education and Culture (2022), is to develop higher education institutions to be more effective and international to promote Finnish competitiveness as well as to flexibly meet the needs of the regions. The higher education institutions educate workforce, who is also able to act in international settings. This is also a leading idea in the language teaching of higher education.

The topic of teaching intercultural communication at school has not been discussed in literature in Finland recently. Existing research about it in Finland is about 10 years old, and it appears not to attract much interest at present either. The term *language awareness* (*kielitietoisuus* in Finnish) appears in many articles, but as Andersen and Ruohotie-Lyhty (2019) state, it focuses more on the knowledge of the language itself. Language awareness pays attention to what kind of language can be used in different situations and when speaking to different kinds of people, especially with young children or non-native speakers, for instance, equality being the operative word. The insufficiency of teaching intercultural communication in language education has, however, been acknowledged. According to the Ministry of Education and Culture (2017), the training of language teachers at universities should be developed and have more culturally sensitive content in the future. P. Holmes (2016) in her article states that even though people do not understand the importance of intercultural competence in their monocultural daily lives, language teachers must prepare the learners to encounter multicultural situations in the future.

1.2 *Language and Cultures*

Chris Rose (2022) describes intercultural communicative competence as “an attempt to raise students’ awareness of their own culture,” which enables them to understand people from different cultures. This is important for students aiming to understand communication in intercultural settings. The importance of teaching about the culture and customs of the language taught has also been discussed by Markku Varis, who notes that language users should be made aware of the differences between cultures and how such differences affect communication, as well as of similarities to avoid stereotypical views. Emphasising the similarities also facilitates seeing differences in a positive light. (2011, pp. 8, 23). According to Katriina Rapatti, language studies should teach learners about the world and broaden their view of it. Languages should be seen as tools for communication (2015, p. 57), which is why language teachers have an important role in teaching about intercultural communication and improving learners’ intercultural competence. Therefore, it is important to remember that in effective communication, where the message and its purpose is understood clearly, knowing words, grammar and phrases is not enough. Rather an awareness of cultural differences must also be learnt. It is useful to learn the language and the culture at the same time (The Language Doctors, 2021). Language proficiency in itself does not guarantee the understanding of cultural differences, albeit it gives new ways to think and fathom the world (Martin, 2016). When intercultural communication is included in language teaching, learners see their own culture from a different aspect and are able to see another culture more from the perspective of an insider (Moeller and Nugent, 2014). According to Sirkku Aaltonen (Leiwo, 2016), it is important that people understand different varieties of English in their daily work, not just American or British (2016). Also, knowing how to speak in different kinds of situations is important. For this reason, Aaltonen has advised her students that it is possible to use any kind of language as long as it is appropriate for the situation. Understanding the significance of stylistic differences and paying attention to the nature of the occasion are key issues in communication. Markku Varis in his article also points out that to be polite in different cultures, for instance, requires more than knowing the words needed in the situation but also knowing how to act according to the local norms (2011, p. 19). When living abroad, but not knowing the language and the culture, one is an outsider in the community, not only being able to attend the discussions and goings-on, but also not knowing how to react and behave according to cultural norms.

2. *The Study*

We studied if and to what extent intercultural communication was a part of language education in different school levels in the Seinäjoki region in western Finland. The study was a qualitative survey where the target group was given multiple choice questions about the topic with some open questions to have more detailed answers. There were six multiple-choice questions about various aspects of intercultural communication in language teaching and two open questions where the respondents could further clarify their answers to the multiple-choice questions. The collected data was then analysed to find how much and in which languages and in which school levels cultural differences

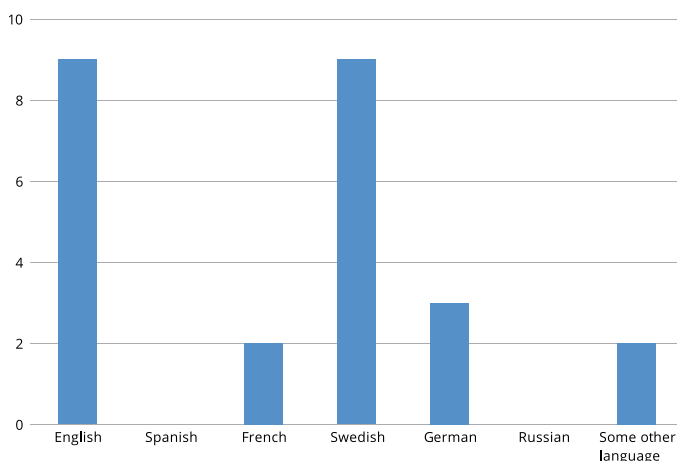
were dealt with in language teaching. Thus, teachers in higher education would get a better understanding of their future students' knowledge of the topic, and how much it should be discussed in the classroom.

The aim was to study if and how language teachers note and teach cultural differences, diversity and misunderstandings in communication in the classroom and discuss them with learners using critical incidents as a tool to understand the misunderstandings. The study was conducted as a survey among language teachers at different school levels (comprehensive schools, upper secondary schools, vocational schools and a university of applied sciences) in the Seinäjoki region. It was sent by email to the teachers, who would answer anonymously. However, the teachers were also asked their willingness to participate in a spoken interview to obtain more detailed information on the topic. None of them volunteered (Appendix I, Appendix II). The data was analysed using quantitative and qualitative content analysis, and the results were presented in tables.

2.1 The Survey

The survey was answered by 15 teachers. Figure 1 shows that the majority of the respondents taught English and Swedish, both totalling 9. Finnish as a second language and French were both taught by two teachers, and three teachers taught German. Foreign language teachers have very often studied two languages in their own studies at the university. Therefore, they often teach more than one language. This is the reason for the higher number of languages taught than the number of teachers participating in the survey. The number of languages taught corresponds closely to the languages studied most at school. As mentioned earlier, English is a popular language in Finland, and among second languages it is the one most pupils study at school. Swedish is a compulsory language at school because of its status as an official language in Finland.

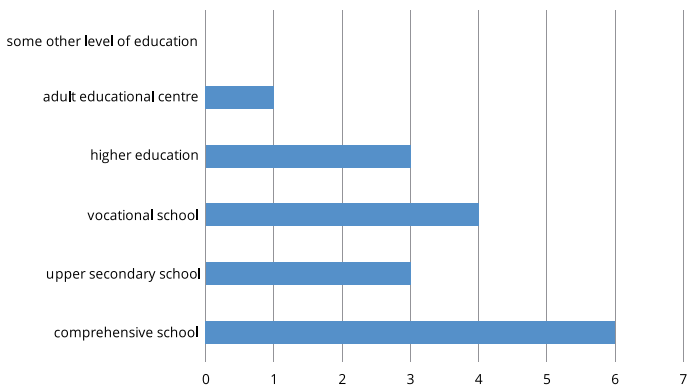
Figure 1: Languages taught by the respondents



The fact most teachers in Finland work in comprehensive schools (school years one to nine) was reflected in the answers received (Figure 2). All in all, the numbers clearly

indicate the number of teachers at different school levels in general. Sometimes language teachers work on different school levels simultaneously, which again could be seen in the numbers of the answers. Six of the teachers were teachers at comprehensive schools, three were upper secondary school teachers, four were vocational schoolteachers, three were university teachers and one an adult education centre teacher.

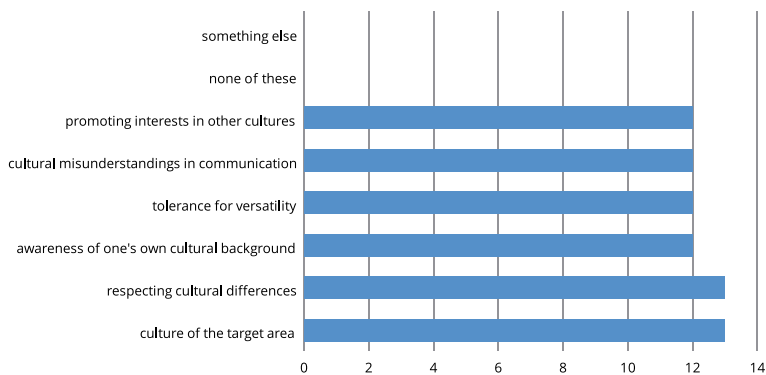
Figure 2: The school levels on which the respondents teach languages



2.2 Intercultural Communication in Language Teaching

The teachers were asked which aspects of culture they covered in their language teaching on top of the language itself. In Figure 3, it can be seen how they answered: 13 of them said they discussed culture of the target area. 13 touched on the respect for cultural differences. 12 teachers dealt with the awareness of one’s own culture. Tolerance of differences was one of the topics with 12 teachers as well as cultural misunderstandings in communication. 12 teachers promoted interest in other cultures. All in all, the topic was incorporated into the language lessons of most of the teachers.

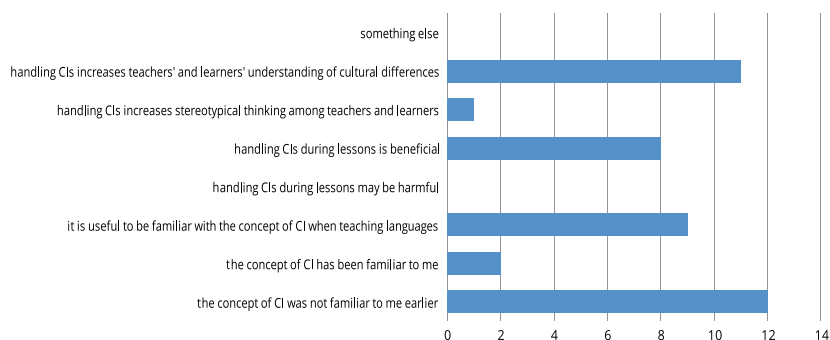
Figure 3: Topics included in language lessons in addition to the language itself



2.3 *Critical Incidents*

When asked if the teachers were familiar with the concept of critical incidents and how they utilised example cases of them in their language teaching, it became obvious that the term was not very familiar to most teachers (Figure 4). According to 12 of the respondents, the concept ‘critical incident’ was not previously known to them, and only two of them had heard about it before. The term was explained to them in the questionnaire and an example case was given. After that the teachers recognised the phenomenon and nine teachers thought that knowing about critical incidents would be useful in language education. None of the teachers considered dealing with the topic in the classroom being detrimental, and eight of them found it useful bringing it up in the classroom. Only one teacher answered that discussing critical incidents would increase stereotypes among both pupils and teachers. On the other hand, 11 teachers found discussing critical incidents in the classroom increasing both pupils’ and teachers’ understanding of cultural differences. Three of the teachers commented on the topic in the open answer. One of them mentioned dealing with critical incidents in teaching, but not very systematically. The topic was discussed in practical situations, even though it was dealt with in the teaching material as well. When answering the survey, s/he had however noticed that the topic should be covered more systematically in teaching. The other two teachers noted that critical incidents were an integral part of language teaching, and that the topic should be discussed more, also in other school subjects than languages, and it would help reaching the common goals set for the comprehensive school.

Figure 4: Being familiar with critical incidents and utilising them when teaching languages

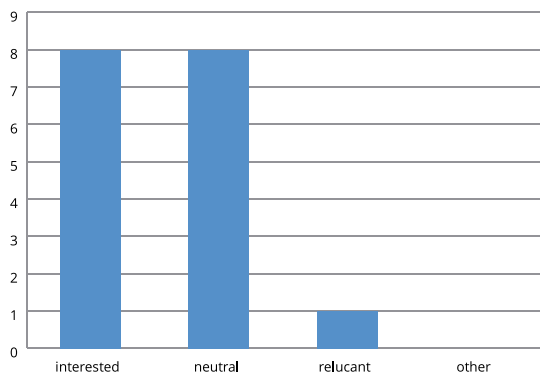


2.4 *Learners' Attitudes to Intercultural Communication*

One of the questions in the survey was about learners’ attitudes towards intercultural communication. The results can be seen in Figure 5. Most of the teachers, i.e., eight, answered that learners showed interest when the topic was dealt with. An identical number thought that learners had a neutral attitude towards intercultural

communication, and only one answered that learners were not interested in the topic but more reluctant to study it.

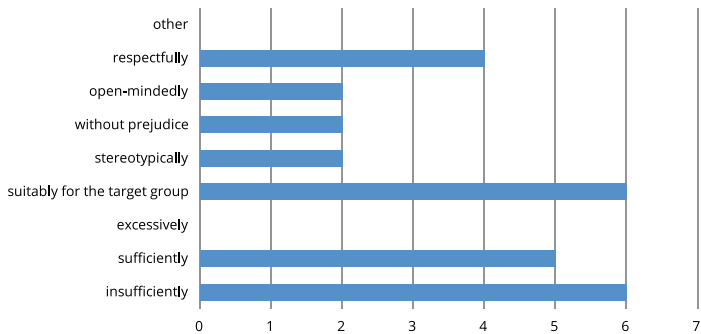
Figure 5: Learners’ attitudes to intercultural communication



2.5 Handling Cultural Differences in Education Material and in Class

When the teachers were asked how cultural differences are addressed in the education material they are using, six of them felt that very little attention has been paid to topics relating to cultural differences in general. On the other hand, five teachers found that the topic is addressed sufficiently. Most of the teachers agreed that the way the topic has been presented in the education material has been suitable for the target group. Two of them felt that cultural differences have been presented stereotypically, whereas some others felt very differently and said that the treatment has been open-minded and without prejudice. Four of the teachers felt that cultural differences have been handled respectfully. Nobody felt there would have been too much material on cultural differences (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Handling of cultural differences in language education material



Based on the study, it can be concluded that the teachers have quite positive views of the way cultural differences are addressed in the current language education material.

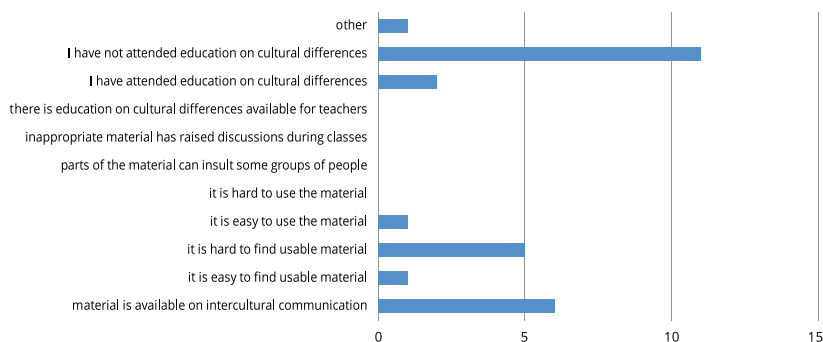
The importance of the topic has been acknowledged as no one seems to think there would be too much attention paid to it. On the contrary, the teachers would have liked to have more material they could use when dealing with cultural differences in language lessons.

When the teachers were asked to describe how they thought the topics relating to cultural differences should be addressed, four of them emphasised the use of practical examples and personal experiences that could then be discussed respectfully, open-mindedly and neutrally to increase understanding and tolerance. It was also noted that attention should be paid to the learners' own cultural backgrounds to make them see how they affect intercultural communication too.

2.6 *Education Material Available for Teachers and Learners*

In Figure 7 it can be seen how the respondents felt about the availability, usability, suitability and correctness of the used language education material and if they had attended training involving cultural differences. According to six teachers, there is ready-made education material on intercultural communication available, but only one of the teachers said it is easy to find and use. Five teachers felt that the material available is hard to use. When asked if the teachers had attended some training on cultural differences, most of them (eleven teachers) answered no and only two had attended that kind of training. One of the teachers pointed out that it is hard to take the topic of cultural differences out of context. No one felt that there would be pictures, texts or songs offensive to some groups of people in the education material they use. This issue had not prompted discussions in class either.

Figure 7: Availability, usability, suitability and correctness of the used language education material and teachers' participation in training involving cultural differences

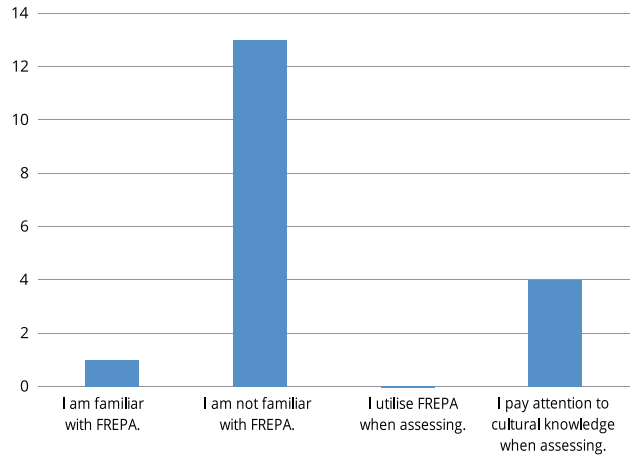


2.7 *FREPA*

The Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches (FREPA) gives teachers didactic approaches and material on how to best execute pluralistic approaches, both multicultural and multilingual, in the classroom. FREPA provides a description of knowledge, skills and attitudes to develop from the perspective of intercultural

communication and practical samples on how a pluralistic approach can best be developed in teaching (European Centre for Modern Languages, 2022; FREPA, 2014). When asked about FREPA, most of the teachers replied that it was unfamiliar to them and only one knew about it. Four teachers, however, answered that they pay attention to cultural knowledge when assessing learners (see Figure 8). It seems that even though a formal framework such as FREPA is not familiar to language teachers in Finland, cultural knowledge has been a natural part of language teaching for quite some time. Even if the FREPA materials do not mention critical incidents as one of the techniques for teaching languages and intercultural communication, critical incidents are nonetheless one element of intercultural communication, and they can be trained through role plays, simulations and drama, the key elements of practicing conversational skills in language training.

Figure 8: Familiarity of FREPA and acknowledging intercultural skills in grading



3. Conclusion

As foreign languages can be considered a tool in multicultural communication situations, critical incidents could be used more in language teaching to showcase the differences between cultures and provide learners with tools to handle problematic situations in cross-cultural communication. Languages, especially English, are studied for years at all levels of the Finnish education system. In studies, vocabulary and grammar tend to dominate and cultural differences do not get the attention they would deserve. Even though teachers are not familiar with the term critical incidents, they occasionally use examples of challenging intercultural situations in language teaching to make learners understand how crucial a role culture has in communication.

The teachers participating in the survey had a positive attitude towards intercultural communication and found it an important topic to be taught in language teaching. They also covered the topic from different angles in their teaching. About half of the

teachers answered that learners also showed interest in the topic. There were mixed feelings about how the education material in use covered the topic of intercultural communication. The differences here could partly be explained by the different school levels and availability of education materials. Language books in comprehensive and upper secondary schools have contained information about the cultures of languages taught already for decades. It has always been a natural part of language teaching but perhaps not always recognised as teaching of intercultural communication. Comprehensive and upper secondary schools have a wider range of language books to choose from, whereas at university level not every field of study has access to suitable ready-made materials, but teachers are more responsible for providing and preparing the materials themselves.

Most of the teachers taking part in the survey realised the need to deal with the topic intercultural communication in the classroom, and especially taking up the topics of cultural differences and critical incidents. The majority of them had not had any actual training in intercultural communication, and the term 'critical incidents' was new to them. The topic had probably become familiar to them through previous studies and personal experiences. Most of the teachers answered, however, that the topic would be useful to be taught, and it would promote the understanding of different cultures with both learners and teachers. Finding ready-made education material on intercultural communication was also a question that raised different opinions. The usability of the material also split opinions. Finding and preparing material on intercultural communication for teaching purposes requires time and resources, which teachers may not have as much as necessary. Therefore, the topic may not be addressed as thoroughly as needed.

Based on the survey, a suggestion would be to have a more thorough course on intercultural communication obligatory at SeAMK for at least students planning an exchange period abroad. The survey displayed the need for including intercultural communication as a more integral part of the curricula at SeAMK. So far it has been a part of compulsory language courses, and it has also been touched in the course Career Planning and Internationalisation, which is compulsory for all second-year students. One or two voluntary courses on intercultural communication have also been available, but they have been chosen only by a few exchange students and no Finnish students.

Another suggestion would be to utilise older students who have been on exchange abroad and have more experience in communicating with people from other cultures to share their experiences with younger students still planning an exchange period abroad. During a longer stay abroad students will likely encounter situations where the communication for some reason is problematic and being aware of such critical incidents will help in dealing with such situations. For this reason, learning through theory and the experiences of returning exchange students would be beneficial.

The third suggestion would be to draft the content of every course so that international visitors would be a natural and obligatory part of them. International exchange periods among teachers and students are common in Finnish universities. Therefore, there may be international students participating or just visiting a course and sometimes lectures may be given by foreign professors. The course should be named so that it would

clearly be a relevant part of the students' professional studies. It could still contain elements of intercultural communication utilising the life experience of returning exchange students and the expertise of visiting foreign students and professors more effectively during normal professional courses. This would benefit all the parties involved, the locals as well as the visitors. As illustrated in this paper, discussing critical incidents helps people realise the importance of cultural awareness in communication. Therefore, including critical incidents as part of language education on all school levels is essential as it improves the intercultural competence of future employees in the evermore international working environment.

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Annex I

Translation of the cover note sent with the questionnaire.

CRITICAL INCIDENTS

Erasmus+ project 2021–2023

As the Ministry of Education has paid more and more attention to language skills and the understanding of cultural differences, we want to study how this is taken into consideration in language teaching at different levels of education. This knowledge affects language teaching in higher education, too.

In daily life, both in free-time and at work, it is important that a language learner acknowledges how the employed language is understood and interpreted, and how one should communicate with different people in different situations. It is necessary to realise the influence of one's own linguistic and cultural identity. With the help of the questionnaire attached to this email our aim is to study if and how this topic is addressed in language teaching at different levels of education.

The questionnaire studies the treatment and utilisation of critical incidents in language teaching, and the target group consists of the language teachers in the western part of Finland. The results will be published in a book which is planned to be published in 2023.

SeAMK is participating in an Erasmus+ project: Critical Incidents in Intercultural Communication and Promoting Diversity. The members of the Finnish team are Anne Vuokila, Riikka Ala-Sankila and Heli Simon. Other project partners are FH Oberösterreich from Austria, Škoda Auto University from Czechia, FH Zwickau from Germany and Università di Siena from Italy. Home (webnode.cz)

What are critical incidents? Here are two examples:

Sales strategy in Poland

A large German company set up in Poland and opened several outlets there. The workers and salespeople were Polish, and the CEO was German. In one meeting the CEO was instructing the salespeople about sales strategy. They should not be too intrusive. After a few months it was noticed that the sales slumped.

Business dinner in Italy

Germans and Italians had a common fair project in Italy, Bologna. After a long day at work, they agreed to go to dinner together. The Italians still wanted to discuss some important details concerning the fair and they invited the Germans for dinner. Right after the apéritif the Germans relaxed and started to laugh, tell jokes and drink more and more. The Italians participated this, but they were disappointed because they were expecting more serious discussions on the fair. The Germans did not notice their disappointment.

In a critical incident

1. different cultures and their norms collide.
2. something goes wrong.
3. participants experience the situation problematic, confusing or amusing.
4. it may remain unclear what happened and why.

In work life and during studies, it is good to remember that mere language skills and travelling experience do not guarantee cultural awareness. Instead, they may give too good an impression of one's communication skills and obscure the perception sensitivity. Therefore, problematic situations may not even be noticed. In our daily lives we may encounter representatives of different cultures in various situations. Therefore, it is important to realise and notice that critical incidents may appear. Moreover, we need to know how to cope with them.

We are grateful for your answers.

Anne Vuokila, Riikka Ala-Sankila

Annex II

Translation of the questionnaire sent to the language teachers.

CRITICAL INCIDENTS IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AS A TOOL IN LANGUAGE TEACHING IN FINLAND

1. I teach the following languages:

- English
- Spanish
- French
- Swedish
- German
- Russian
- Some other language.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

I teach at a:

- comprehensive school
- upper secondary school
- vocational school
- higher education
- adult education centre
- some other level of education.

3. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Select suitable statements.

During my lessons the following topics are addressed in addition to the language itself:

- culture of the target area
- respecting cultural differences
- awareness of one's own cultural background
- tolerance for versatility
- cultural misunderstandings in communication
- promoting interest in other cultures
- none of these
- something else.

4. Critical incidents (later CI)

Select suitable statements.

- The concept of CI was not familiar to me earlier.
 - The concept of CI was familiar to me.
 - It is useful to be familiar with the concept of CI when teaching languages.
 - Addressing CIs during lessons may be detrimental.
 - Addressing CIs during lessons is beneficial.
 - Addressing CIs increases stereotypical thinking among teachers and learners.
 - Handling CIs increases teachers' and learners' understanding of cultural differences.
 - Something else.
5. Free comment on questions 3 and 4 concerning intercultural communication and the treatment of cultural misunderstandings in teaching.
6. Learners' attitude to intercultural communication is mainly:
- interested
 - neutral
 - reluctant
 - other.

7. EDUCATION MATERIAL

Select suitable statements.

In the education material I use, cultural differences are addressed:

- insufficiently
 - sufficiently
 - excessively
 - suitably for the target group
 - stereotypically
 - without prejudice
 - open-mindedly
 - respectfully
 - other.
8. How should cultural differences be addressed in your opinion?
9. Select the statements that describe teaching and learning material.
- There is available ready-made education material on intercultural communication.
 - It is easy to find usable material.
 - It is hard to find usable material.

- It is easy to use the material.
- It is hard to use the material.
- In the education material there are pictures, texts or songs that are experienced as insulting to certain groups of people.
- Inappropriate material has raised discussions during classes.
- There is education on cultural differences available for teachers.
- I have attended training on cultural differences.
- I have not attended training on cultural differences.
- Other.

10. ASSESSMENT

Through the link you can find more information on FREPA

CARAP > Accueil (ecml.at)

Select suitable statements.

- I am familiar with FREPA.
- I am not familiar with FREPA.
- I utilise FREPA when assessing.
- I pay attention to cultural knowledge when assessing.

11. We would like to interview some respondents relating to the topic of the questionnaire at the end of August.