

# Joe's Laundry: Using Critical Incidents to Develop Intercultural and Foreign Language Competence in Study Abroad and Beyond

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## **Abstract:**

The development of intercultural competence and foreign language skills in study abroad and the foreign language (FL) classroom is often seen as an either/or proposition due to lack of time, training or the availability of materials in the target language. The Critical Incident method (CI) provides an example of an intercultural training tool that can link these competencies in ways that are developmentally appropriate for the FL and IC levels of the students. This method uses authentic intercultural mishaps to develop critical thinking skills as students reflect on the cultural values and attitudes underlying the experience. Drawing on research in study abroad FL pedagogy, this paper describes the CI method, provides a review of best practices in the context of study abroad, and develops an example of a CI from a study abroad program in France to illustrate how cultural incidents can be used to promote both intercultural and foreign language competence.

Almost anyone who has crossed cultures either at home or abroad has stories to tell about missteps that can be funny, sad, embarrassing, upsetting, frustrating or sometimes even exhilarating. Intercultural trainers refer to these cultural misunderstandings as “critical incidents” or CI. Although critical incidents have their origin in a technique developed by psychologists (Flanagan, 1954), by the 1960s, interculturalists charged with training Peace Corps volunteers for their international assignments, had begun to collect the various stories brought back by volunteers and to use them as the starting point for discussions about how to effectively navigate other cultures (Wight, 1967). The incidents were described and then analyzed to learn why it happened, what could have been done differently, and what volunteers would need to know in the future in order not to repeat the same mistakes. Since then, cultural incidents have become a standard component of the intercultural toolkit, and are regularly included in classes, workshops, all phases of study abroad, and other contexts where building intercultural competence is an explicit goal.

Critical incidents can be especially effective intercultural training tools because they grow out of the student's own experiences, are therefore personal, authentic encounters, often emotionally charged, and highly relevant to the specific situation in which the student finds him or herself. They can also be adapted to many different formats for discussion, role plays, mini case studies, reflective essay assignments, and cultural assimilations, among others. Despite these many advantages, the CI method rarely finds its way into foreign language (FL) instruction for a variety of reasons such as

lack of material in the target language and lack of time for cultural activities when language skills are prioritized. Language teachers may also be unfamiliar with intercultural training methods, have little knowledge of foundational intercultural theories, and be confused about the intersection between language acquisition and intercultural development. The following discussion examines this intersection and uses the example of the CI method to illustrate how this intercultural training tool can serve as a bridge linking intercultural learning with the development of FL competence, a linkage that works in the context of study abroad as well as the domestic classroom. It includes a description of the CI method, a review of best practices for using this approach in study abroad, and a detailed example taken from a study abroad program in France and developed into exercises in the target language that can be integrated into FL instruction both at home and abroad.

## **Intercultural competence and language acquisition: Defining the relationship**

This approach to using critical incidents as both an intercultural and language training tool grows out of research examining the relationship between language learning and the development of intercultural competence (IC), a topic that is being actively debated and researched, especially in the context of study abroad (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Moeller & Faltin Osborn, 2014). The debate, which provides the framework for my approach to applying the CI method in FL instruction, begins with the fundamental question of how to define intercultural competence. Although there is no strict consensus among intercultural professionals for defining intercultural competence, or even what the terminology should be – cultural intelligence, global mind-set, culture learning or intercultural communicative competence – it is generally viewed as “a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts” (Bennett, 2008). This widely accepted definition is the basis for the Intercultural Knowledge and Competence VALUE rubric developed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) as part of its Liberal Education and America’s Promise, or LEAP assessment initiative. The AAC&U’s work on intercultural competence is a clear indication that intercultural competence has been identified as a critical component of education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It appears as an explicit goal in many contexts such as university mission statements where the focus is on creating a curriculum that will develop undergraduates into global citizens who are prepared to take on the challenges of living and working in our increasingly interconnected world. The role of foreign or second language acquisition in realizing these ambitious goals, however, is not so clear. The intercultural specialists surveyed by Deardorff, for example, in a foundational study that helped shape the AAC&U rubric, did not rank fluency in a foreign language as a vital prerequisite for developing intercultural skills and could not agree on the role and importance of language in intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006). Others in higher education, such as Dieter Wanner, stress the value of learning foreign languages and consider the “linguistic empowerment of students” as “a privileged means of internationalizing the curriculum” (Wanner, 2009, p. 84). The federal government has also emphasized the important role that foreign language education plays in national security and keeping the U.S. economy globally competitive (CED report, 2006).

The picture becomes even more complex when study abroad is added into the equation. Universities devoted to promoting intercultural competence among their students, will often invest in study abroad as a major component of their intercultural mission. The most recent IEE Open

Doors data shows that while the number of American students studying abroad in 2015-16 has increased, with about 10% of undergraduates from U.S. institutions currently studying abroad, the trend is toward shorter term programs with 63% participating in programs of eight weeks or less. The largest number of U.S. students participating in study abroad programs is from STEM fields, with Business not far behind. Surprisingly, only 8% of students studying abroad are in disciplines related to foreign languages and International Studies (Open Doors, 2016). The trend toward shorter programs designed for disciplines where the curriculum is often in English suggests that the current generation of students studying abroad is more motivated to acquire intercultural skills than foreign language proficiency (Norris & Steinberg, 2008). Although students enrolling in these programs and the specialists designing them might feel that they have to decide between promoting language skills or intercultural development, the challenge is not to decide which one to prioritize, but rather to find ways to effectively integrate language instruction with intercultural learning. There is, in fact, much that language teachers can learn from research on intercultural development in the context of study abroad.

Although study abroad was once considered the gold standard for how to best acquire language skills, cultural knowledge and intercultural competence, it is becoming increasingly clear that being physically present in a foreign culture is not enough for these skills to develop (Vande Berg et al., 2012). The immersion paradigm is being challenged by research aimed at measuring gains in IC and L2 proficiency among students studying abroad that has been unable to establish a consistent and strong correlation between the two (Jackson, 2011; Magnan & Back, 2007; Norris & Steinberg, 2008; Savicki, 2011; Watson & Wolfel, 2015). The Georgetown Consortium Study, for example, which examined pre and post study abroad results from 1,300 students in 60 study abroad programs, failed to find a direct correlation between gains in oral proficiency (as measured by Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview [SOPI]) and intercultural development (measured by Intercultural Development Inventory [IDI]; Vande Berg, Connor-Linton & Paige, 2009). There is also a shift occurring at home among foreign and second language acquisition specialists who contend that it is no longer sufficient to teach culture through language; the new focus is to teach language interculturally (Durocher, 2007; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Moeller & Nugent, 2014; Wilkinson et al., 2015). The question of how to best achieve this, whether abroad or at home, is being debated by intercultural trainers and foreign language educators who do not always see eye to eye on the relationship between intercultural competence and language proficiency, or even on what type of culture they are teaching.

ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) has recently refreshed the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages (National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015) to include cultural competence in the goal areas of cultures and comparisons, making it central to language teaching in general. Although culture has always been at the core of the learning standards, in the past it has been largely understood as “big C,” referring to the products produced by a culture such as food, music, and literature, the content that is typically incorporated into the foreign language curriculum. Subjective culture, that is, culture with a “small c,” refers to the values and attitudes of a cultural group that are not so visible on the surface. These are the aspects of culture that language teachers have the most difficulty working into the curriculum, and it is also where cultural misunderstandings are most likely to pop up (Durocher, 2007; Fonseca-Greber, 2010; Moeller & Faltin Osborn, 2014; Wilkinson, et al., 2015). As Cushner & Brislin explain, “It is much

more difficult for people to speak about, observe and understand what is going on when it is the subjective elements of their culture that are in conflict with those of another” (1996, p. 6). This is also an area where intercultural training, which includes critical incidents, and study abroad, where many critical incidents originate, has an especially important role to play in language learning.

Whereas intercultural professionals have created a wealth of resources on critical incidents, some of which target specific cultures, few of the off-the-shelf materials were designed with language learners in mind.<sup>1</sup> Many, if not most, intercultural learning activities were developed for general use and intended for a wider audience than students of foreign languages.<sup>2</sup> Intercultural training for Americans, whether they are students or professionals preparing for overseas assignments, is most often conducted in English and is “culture general” in that the skills learned can be applied broadly to any culture. Language teachers tend to focus more narrowly on a specific target language and content related to a limited number of national cultures. Supporting this distinction is the widely-held misapprehension that intercultural development relies on reflection and critical thinking skills requiring a high level of sophistication in the target language that does not often correspond to the L2 proficiency levels of the students we teach. In other words, intercultural training and language acquisition have been traditionally taught separately because they seem to differ significantly as far as content and methodology (Watson, 2010).

Contributors to *Culture as the core*, which brings together ideas for integrating culture into the second language classroom, describe culture-general approaches to intercultural competence as focusing on “internalizing cognitive frameworks for cultural analysis, overcoming ethnocentrism, developing appreciation and respect for one’s own culture and for cultural difference, understanding and acquiring skills in basic cultural adaptation processes” (Bennett, Bennett & Allen, 2003, p. 245). They also advocate intercultural training that uses a combination of culture-specific and culture-general approaches. One of the culture-general theoretical frameworks widely used by interculturalists is Milton Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity or DMIS (Bennett, 1986, 1993). Bennett based his model on direct observation of how people act when confronted with cultural differences. He identified six stages through which learners move as they become more sensitive to cultural differences, moving from an ethnocentric perspective (or monocultural mindset), where cultural differences are ignored or seen as threatening, to a more complex and intercultural mindset in that the learner is able to shift perspectives to understand and adapt to different cultural world views. Bennett’s model is based on constructivist theory that posits our experience of the world as occurring through constructs that make up our world view. Working with Bennett’s model, Hammer developed the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), a quantitative tool often used in international education to assess intercultural competence.<sup>3</sup> Because

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<sup>1</sup> Some examples include *The Intercultural Sourcebook: Cross-Cultural Training Methods Vol. 1*, Cushner & Brislin’s *Intercultural interactions*, La Brack’s *What’s up with Culture?* And Craig Storti’s *Cross-Cultural Dialogues: 74 brief encounters with cultural differences*.

<sup>2</sup> One of the exceptions is the Maximizing Study Abroad Project, which originated at the University of Minnesota’s Center for Advanced Research in Language Acquisition. See Paige, Harvey, & McCleary, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> I refer in this article to the DMIS since this is the model most frequently cited in the literature. Hammer (2012), has revised some aspects of Bennett’s original framework to create the Intercultural Development Continuum (IDC). The IDC redefines Minimization as a transitional phase and eliminates the Integration phase. Hammer’s work on IDI guided reflection has also impacted intercultural training and resonates with many aspects of the CI method.

the DMIS is culture-general and developmental, it can provide a framework for developing intercultural competencies applicable to any culture. But how does this model fit with levels of language proficiency?

The DMIS does not explicitly address foreign languages, but Bennett, Bennett and Allen (2003) describe a parallel between language competence as the ability to use language as an insider, and intercultural competence, as the ability to interpret and behave within culture as an insider. In this model, novice-level language competence corresponds to the lower or more monocultural stages of the DMIS with increasing language competence relating to higher or more intercultural stages of intercultural sensitivity. Although former ACTFL president Jacque Van Houten does not ground her notion of intercultural competence in the DMIS as do Bennett, Bennett and Allen, she expresses a similar understanding of the codependence of language skills and cultural knowledge on learners' demonstrations of interculturality. According to Van Houten, "No matter how much experience one has in the target culture, a Novice High speaker will not be able to demonstrate a higher level of interculturality because he or she lacks the language proficiency to do it. Nor will someone with a high level of language proficiency but little experience with the target culture be able to demonstrate strong intercultural competency" (Van Houten, 2015, p. 164). This same relationship between the development of language and intercultural skills is reflected in the National Council of State Supervisors for Foreign Languages (NCSSFL/ACTFL) Interculturality Can-Do Statements that posit an increase in intercultural competence as students move up the language proficiency continuum.

Research examining the relationship between CI and L2 development challenges this premise with findings suggesting that "the developmental sequence of intercultural competence does not necessarily parallel linguistic competence," and that intercultural competences might not naturally grow with the development of linguistics skills (Jackson, 2011, p. 181). Studies that assess the intercultural growth of their students can attest to the mismatch that frequently occurs between a student's language proficiency and his or her level of intercultural competence (Durocher, 2007; Jackson, 2011). My own experience as a French teacher and study abroad director who has used the IDI to measure the intercultural sensitivity of my students confirms that the two competencies are often out of synch. That is, students with low levels of language proficiency may have a more intercultural worldview than their more fluent classmates, contrary to what many FL educators would have us believe, and the opposite may also be true. Although a parallel relationship might seem logical or natural, interculturalists have long recognized that knowing a language, and knowing what to do with that language in an intercultural context, are not the same thing, hence the expression "fluent fools." Moreover, because language teachers focus on language acquisition, they may be unwittingly limiting their understanding of interculturality as only taking place at the level of discourse, what Byram refers to as an "intercultural speaker" in his model of intercultural communicative competency, or ICC (Byram, 1997). Intercultural competence is distinguished from ICC in that the latter "requires communication and relationship building using the TL" (Moeller & Faltin Osborn, 2014, p. 672) whereas IC, is much broader and does not. This same limitation characterizes the Interculturality Can-do statements which focus on "the demonstration of interaction between the use of language skills and cultural knowledge" (NCSSFL/ACTFL, 2017), although the most recent statements note that in respect to ICC, "the lack of sufficient language proficiency does not prevent the internalization of cultural perspectives, it only hinders the ability to

communicate them in the target language” (NCSSFL/ACTFL, 2017). Both models fall short of measuring *attitudes*, a critical component of intercultural competence that is not necessarily linked to demonstrable language skills.

## Lessons from study abroad research

The use of Critical Incidents as described below, addresses many of these concerns and misunderstandings because it shows how language teachers can adapt intercultural training methods and materials to fit both the intercultural development and L2 proficiency levels of their students. The question of how to best meet the needs of student on both the intercultural and linguistic fronts draws on the research of interculturalists who focus on study abroad in order to identify the best mix of elements to deliver optimal results in developing intercultural and L2 proficiency. This is precisely the question that Vande Berg et al. explore (2012). Their conclusion, which has important implications for the foreign language instruction, highlights the strategy of providing active and ongoing support of student learning “through intentional mentoring and guidance that is designed to help them learn to reflect on themselves as cultural beings, and to become aware of the ways that they characteristically respond to and make meaning within different cultural contexts” (Vande Berg, Paige & Lou, 2012, p. 415). Savicki, whose research examines factors affecting the psychological well-being of students during study abroad, also stresses the importance of critical thinking in achieving positive outcomes. His work suggests that knowing a language appears to be less important than knowing how to use a language, and that growth in intercultural competence and sensitivity “may stem from the student’s ability to reflect on their experience of being an outsider or out group” and the “willingness to think critically about cultural distinctions that arise from interactions with host nationals” (Savicki, 2011, p. 77). Bacon (2002) echoes this approach by calling for students studying abroad to keep a journal to record their impressions and feelings, and give themselves time to reflect on their experiences. Reflection on intercultural encounters is also incorporated into the standards-based LinguaFolio tool which guides students to examine and understand behaviors as part of the learning process (NCSSFL, 2018; Ziegler & Moeller, 2012). Engle & Engle take this one step further in their study abroad program at the American University Center of Provence (AUCP) by building a highly structured reflection piece into the program design. This includes ongoing cultural mentoring and a course called “Cultural Patterns” that introduces students to “the use of a self-reflective series of questions that call attention to the very human tendency to project culturally conditioned judgements and assumptions into ambiguous situations” (Engle & Engle, 2012, p. 302).

The main takeaways from these practices suggest that an effective intercultural approach to teaching language would focus less on grammar and structure, and more on the *process*; in other words, seeing language as a social practice that functions within a cultural context and involves “the transformational engagement of the learner in the act of learning” (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, p 29). Although students of foreign languages may never set foot in a foreign country, they will nevertheless encounter cultural differences in their daily lives. By bringing authentically generated cultural encounters into the FL classroom in the form of critical incidents, teachers can help their students develop life-long intercultural learning strategies that challenge them to examine “their own beliefs and practices through a different lens, negotiate points of view different from their own, and gain an insider’s perspective of another culture” (Moeller & Nugent, 2014, p. 14). The lessons from study abroad can be incorporated into the classroom with the teacher taking on the role of

facilitator who provides support and helps guide the student through a process of reflection that leads to self-awareness, the ability to shift perspectives and generate appropriate and effective behavior in an intercultural context. The type of support required for this to happen differs from student to student because each student approaches cultural difference from a unique perspective and progresses at different speeds (Moeller & Faltin Osborn, 2014). Teachers need to be aware of the mismatch that can occur between levels of language proficiency and intercultural competence so that they do not challenge students to complete tasks that are beyond their abilities (Bennett, 2008). In the context of study abroad, students can be easily overwhelmed and suffer culture shock, even if they have a working control of the foreign language (Magnan & Back, 2007). As Durocher has noted, teachers may also risk reinforcing negative cultural stereotypes in the classroom by assigning intercultural activities that are too advanced for students still in the monocultural stages of intercultural development (Durocher, 2007). With proper support and carefully sequenced intercultural learning activities such as critical incidents, the FL classroom can provide students with the opportunity to reflect on their own cultural values in ways that are developmentally appropriate.

### **How to make an incident “critical”**

Although the word “critical” might imply some sort of crisis is involved in a CI, the incident begins as a simple description of a situation where cultural differences caused a misstep, conflict or misunderstanding. The description most often takes the form of a narrative, but for some incidents, a dialogue may be a more effective format. The Cultural Assimilator (CA) is another popular format for teaching critical incidents, but it does not require critical analysis because the learner chooses an explanation for the misunderstanding among several possibilities and is then directed to a solution. The crucial difference between CA and CI is that cultural incidents rely on experiential learning methodology where the learner must analyze the situation and come up with his own possible interpretations and solutions. Experts have already interpreted the incidents used in CA by supplying a preferred solution and explanation among several possible choices. The difference is similar to a multiple choice exam versus an essay exam (Wight, 1995). Cultural assimilators also rely on experts to develop and validate the incidents, thus making CA more time consuming and expensive to produce.

Critical incidents are based on experiences or events that are usually something typical or commonplace that may or may not be culture specific. To create a CI, students should first write about an actual cultural mishap they’ve experienced when it is fresh in their minds, often in the form of a blog, journal entry or other written assignment.<sup>4</sup> Incidents can also be generated from interviews with students. This provides the raw material that is then reformatted to form the basis of a critical incident. The first step is to present the experience with only enough information to describe it, where it happened, who was involved, and how the people involved reacted. It is important that the CI does not go into the “why” of the incident. It only becomes “critical” when critical analysis is applied to understanding what happened and the why is then uncovered as part of the CI exercise. As Tripp rightly states, “critical incidents are not simply observed, they are literally created” (1993: p. 27). Another important criterion is that the incident must have a more general

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<sup>4</sup> The templates designed by Spencer-Oatey for intercultural learning through journaling provide useful examples of formats in English.

meaning; that is, the situation should illustrate some underlying pattern or patterns that can be viewed in a wider context through reflection and discussion. For this reason, many intercultural trainers prefer to group CIs together around common themes, an approach recommended by Wight (1995), Tripp (1993) and Cushner and Brislin (1996).

A CI begins as a personal experience that becomes revelatory to the person who experiences when he or she works through aspects of the incident to make sense of it. The process of transforming experience into knowledge is best understood in terms of Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory which describes the four modes in an experiential learning cycle: experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting (Kolb, 1984). Guiding students through the reflecting and thinking stages in this cycle is the key to developing a critical incident into an effective intercultural learning experience. The teacher acts as a facilitator who provides structured prompts that lead the learner to consider the cultural assumptions that underlie their thoughts and reactions to the initial incident, to question the validity of those assumptions, and then propose other possible explanations for the cultural aspects of the incident (Kolb & Kolb, 2013). In the telling and retelling of the stories that generate critical incidents, students develop insights into their own cultural perspective as they "de-center" and consider the elements of the CI from different cultural perspectives.

As described by the DMIS, students begin this process from their specific stage of intercultural development. If they are in polarization, for example, they may not be aware of their own culture and how it shapes their reaction to cultural difference. At this monocultural stage students use their own culture as the default perspective from which to determine what is good (i.e. my own culture's way of doing things) and bad (i.e. the other culture). Negative stereotyping and defensive postures that define the world in terms of "us" and "them," characterize this stage. One of the main obstacles for foreign language teachers working to develop intercultural competence in their students is that few Americans value seeing the world from the perspective of "other" (Fonseca-Greber, 2010). The prevalence of social media in their lives can also lead them to believe that as the world gets smaller, cultural differences diminish. To move beyond a monocultural mindset, students should be guided to look for similarities and differences as they identify cultural patterns that may not match what is considered "normal" in their own culture. Instead of pointing students to a "right answer," the CI method invites students to explore, discuss and evaluate possible interpretations that bring their own cultural assumptions, values and practices to light (Hammer, 2012). The insights that result from this guided reflection can generate behavior that is appropriate and effective for a specific cultural context such as study abroad. But perhaps more importantly, students discover an approach to dealing with cultural differences that can be part of a life-long intercultural learning process regardless of what language they may be learning or what culture they may find themselves in.

### **Critical incidents in study abroad**

Three examples of successful study abroad programs will illustrate best practices for using critical incidents. In these programs, critical incidents are incorporated into one or, ideally, into all phases of study abroad: pre-departure orientation, on-site activities, and the re-entry phase. These examples, however, do not explicitly address foreign language acquisition. A fourth example from a study abroad program in France, will demonstrate the flexibility of the CI and how to adapt this intercultural training tool to the language learning classroom.



One of the better-known and long-running study abroad programs that incorporate CI into the required coursework for students preparing for and returning from study abroad are those run by the University of the Pacific (Bathurst & La Brack, 2012). In the University of the Pacific (UP) programs, students are required to produce two incidents from their experience, one of which they write up and teach to their peers in the form of a mini-quiz that requires students to speculate about reasons for the incident occurring. The students in the UP study abroad programs produce 30-40 CI each semester which then become part of a data base organized by country, gender, program, city and dates, forming a sort of “institutional memory” that students are encouraged to use. More than 1,000 critical incidents have been collected from UP programs over the years. These peer-generated accounts have the added bonus of being credible to other students who can use them to help avoid some of the problems encountered by previous study abroad participants. Used in this way, CI can become a valuable pedagogical resource for the orientation and re-entry phases of study abroad.

Another model program that has integrated critical incidents into the design of study abroad is the “Asian Studies in Business and Economics” (ASBE) program at the University of Paderborn in Germany (Dehmel, Li & Sloane, 2011). This is a Masters-level program that, similar to the University of the Pacific format, requires students to complete intercultural modules before studying abroad, during their stay in Asia, and after their return. While abroad, students write about their experiences in the form of reflective diaries, concept papers and reflection reports. Upon return, they share their experiences by first discussing and analyzing the problems highlighted by these intercultural encounters in small groups. The groups subsequently rewrite these experiences in the form of critical incidents that become the basis of role-plays or simulation exercises. Critical incidents play a part in the preparatory and return phases of the ASBE program.

The seven-week cross-cultural seminar in Vietnam sponsored by World University Services of Canada also makes extensive use of critical incidents (Arthur, 2001). In this program, CI methodology was used to track stress and the coping experiences identified by the participants during their process of cross-cultural adjustment. The open-ended prompts designed for this study had students focus on stressful experiences, the actions they took to deal with the stress, and what they learned about themselves in the process. This program illustrates how CI can be customized to focus on particular aspects of the study abroad experience, and it also corresponds with Savicki’s recommendation about helping students with specific situations they are likely to encounter abroad such as host family relations and how to find food – both of which are major sources of anxiety and stress for students studying abroad.

### **A critical incident from France: Joe’s dirty laundry**

The critical incident used in this example corresponds with one of the stress factors identified by Savicki – host family relations (Savicki, 2011, 2012). It originated in a short-term summer study abroad program in France developed for American students studying French at a mid-sized American university in the Midwest. For the four-week program, students are housed individually with French host families to maximize the immersion factor. Students are supported by an on-site faculty director who has daily interactions with them. The prerequisite for the program is one-year of college French, but the oral proficiency levels of the students who participate generally range from Novice-high to Intermediate-high on the ACTFL scale. Similarly, pre-study abroad testing with the IDI shows a broad distribution of intercultural development ranging from the ethnocentric stage

of denial to the more complex ethnorelative or intercultural stage of acceptance. The IDI group average tends to be in low minimization. Once in France, students are assigned journal topics that include describing any difficulties they encounter that could form the basis of a cultural incident. Depending on their level of French, students can choose to write the initial description in either English or in French. Students with limited L2 proficiency may have difficulty writing an accurate account, and the constraints of using the target language may also prevent them from regularly and spontaneously recording the intercultural mishaps they experience. Although the original experience may be first described in English, follow-up activities where the incident is developed into a CI, are completed in the target language. Near the end of the program, students are asked to orally present an incident they experienced and to lead a discussion in French of the cultural differences that emerge from the incident. The CIs generated by students are collected, revised and used in pre-study abroad orientation sessions to familiarize the next group of students preparing to study abroad with the CI concept and format since they, in turn, will be asked to create critical incidents from their own intercultural encounters during their program in France.

Joe (not his real name), the student who reported this incident, had completed one year of college-level French, and was at Novice-high level of oral proficiency. He was placed in a homestay with a middle-aged, middle-class French couple who had one adult daughter living at home. Both parents were professionals, often hosted foreign students, and spoke very little English. The host families were expected to feed the students two meals each day, include them in family activities, and take care of the students' laundry. Joe's incident occurred near the beginning of his stay when he was down to his last clean shirt. Using his limited French, he asked his host mother to wash his clothes. She assured him that she would. The next day, however, Joe's clothes had not been washed. He was getting desperate, so he asked again. His host mother again assured him that she would wash his clothes. When his clothes were still not clean the following day, Joe contacted the host family liaison at the university to complain. He didn't understand why his clothes were still not being washed. The liaison spoke with the host mother who was upset that Joe would complain to the university about her when she had repeatedly assured him that she would wash his clothes. That weekend, Joe's host mother did all of the family's laundry.

The narrative above forms the basis for a critical incident because important cultural differences come into play here that Joe did not understand until his host mother actually did the family laundry and he was able to work through his reaction to the situation. He observed that the family did not own a dryer, and that washing laundry involved hanging all the clothes out to line dry, a time-consuming task that his host mother, who had a full-time job, reserved for weekends. When he wrote out his account of this incident, Joe expressed his shock and dismay that there was no clothes dryer at the house, something that also surprised many of the other students on the program. In his analysis of the situation, he compared his expectations that laundry could be done on an "as needed" basis, which is how he did laundry at home, with the weekend schedule of his host mother who needed a different time frame to accomplish this task.

For Joe, a middle-aged returning student who was single and very independent, this incident proved to be somewhat damaging to his relationship with his host family, but his CI analysis also led him to a valuable realization about himself. During the pre-study abroad orientation phase, students in the program took the IDI to identify their stage of intercultural development according to

Bennett's DMIS model. Joe placed into the cusp between the Defense or Polarization stage, and the transitional stage of Minimization. His trailing orientation, which could manifest during times of stress, was Defense, a monocultural worldview where one's own culture is seen as normal and good, and the "other" culture is seen as inferior, bad or wrong (Hammer, 2012). This perspective seems to accurately reflect Joe's initial reaction to the dirty laundry incident. Joe prided himself on being self-sufficient and was not comfortable having to count on someone else to do his laundry for him. While the lack of a dryer in the family home was certainly new to him, the laundry episode also helped him to recognize that his strong desire to be independent was preventing him from identifying and adjusting to the unfamiliar patterns that his French host family had established for routine domestic tasks such as shopping, meals and laundry. Instead of trying to fit in, Joe wanted to be free to do things on his own schedule, much like he did at home.

In Joe's case, a home stay with this particular family was a bad fit for his level of intercultural competence since the adjustment it required was too challenging for his defensive mindset. From the perspective of Defense, he saw self-sufficiency as a strength, whereas his French family most likely found him to be demanding, inflexible, and disrespectful of how things are done at their house. They never bonded, but his host family eventually realized that it was best to not try to integrate Joe into their routine. Joe rented a bicycle during his stay to be even more independent, and his host parents gave him suggestions for places to visit and things to do on his own. He reported his overall experience in France as a positive one despite the mismatch with his family, a result corroborated by studies showing that negative experiences abroad do not necessarily detract from a student's satisfaction with the program and may, in fact, help to mobilize their coping ability (Savicki, 2012). Joe's post IDI results also supports this conclusion since it showed an increase of more than three points, thus placing him more firmly in the transitional stage of Minimization. This represents a modest but significant increase for participation in a short-term program. Moreover, the self-knowledge he gained through the dirty laundry and other incidents experienced abroad, helped Joe become less threatened and more open-minded about cultural differences.

This simple incident provided a rich foundation for Joe's intercultural learning; it also became the basis for application of the CI method by students on the program who did not personally experience it. Similarly, students at home could work through authentic incidents like Joe's in the target language at developmentally appropriate levels. Joe's interpretation of some of the more advanced implications of his laundry story, for example, was initially hampered by his monocultural mindset and not his French skills. Even though Joe's proficiency in French was quite low (Novice-high), he was still able to describe this incident in his journal, writing part of it out in English and part of it in French. His teacher corrected his first draft, which he then rewrote in French, thus providing him with the linguistic support and feedback he needed to further develop the incident both orally and in writing. When Joe presented his laundry incident to class, he first described the situation, then provided several multiple-choice reasons that could explain why the laundry was not done (i.e. *Ma mère d'accueil n'avait pas le temps de faire la lessive; Elle n'a pas compris mon demande; Il n'y avait pas de sèche-linge à la maison*). He identified lack of a dryer and using the weekend for completing domestic tasks as possible reasons. To expand on Joe's presentation, students in the program shared whether their host families owned dryers (most of them didn't) and speculated about the underlying reasons. (i.e. *La maison est trop petite, Ça coûte trop cher*). The teacher then prompted them to examine the French perspective. Do the French actually prefer to line-dry clothes, and if so, why? As a

follow-up, students interviewed their host families on the pros and cons of clothes dryers and reported back to the group that those who preferred line-drying thought that dryers consumed a lot of energy, took up too much space, and were expensive and “bad for clothes.” Based on these results, students concluded that Americans value efficiency and convenience, whereas the French are more concerned with conservation efforts, and preserving the quality of their clothing. This difference in values helped explain the patterns of consumption they observed during their homestays.

Finally, the study abroad director was able to use Joe’s incident to revise the pre-study abroad orientation material for the next cohort of students travelling to France. To better prepare students for their homestay, students wrote about their expectations for living with a host family. To avoid future dirty laundry incidents, the director now requires students to become familiar with the family routine early on. To this end, students create a list of questions about the family routine to ask their host families during their first days in France. Unlike Joe, students often feel so comfortable with their host families that they will focus on similarities, believing them to be universal, and consequently fail to recognize or acknowledge important differences. This mindset is typical of the “minimization” stage of the DMIS where the challenge is to focus on differences. An appropriate activity for students in minimization that builds on the “dirty laundry” incident is to create a list in French of items (appliances, gadgets) they have in their own homes, and then survey their French host family to learn if they possess similar or different items. This activity not only introduces students to practical new vocabulary, it invites them to observe differences they might overlook. Some French families may own a raclette pan, for example, and identification of this item could lead to a meal of scraped melted cheese served with steamed potatoes!

As students identify patterns and discover exceptions, the values underlying the laundry incident emerge as students begin to understand why Americans are often portrayed as wasteful. In a study abroad situation, they can be prepared to investigate other common practices for saving energy on site such as the use of timed light switches, recycling, smaller cars, use of mass transit, etc. For students in the DMIS stages of Denial or Polarization, however, it can be stressful to put the conservation efforts favored by their French hosts into practice and respect their families’ choices. Some students may consider that taking long, hot showers is essential to their well-being, and balk at the idea of restricting shower use to ten minutes or less. For others, study abroad may be their first exposure to using mass transportation, an eye-opening experience for students who are used to the car-oriented culture of the U.S. Teachers need to prepare students in advance for some of these typical cultural experiences in ways that are developmentally appropriate to their competencies in language and intercultural proficiency. Providing them with the linguistic and intercultural tools to work through their reactions such as the CI method, making sure that they understand the inevitability of culture shock and have a safe space once abroad to record, reflect on and discuss critical incidents, will help them to adapt and hopefully lead to more positive outcomes during study abroad.

### **Using critical incidents in the FL classroom**

The CI-related tasks above can be easily adjusted for different language proficiency levels and incorporated into classroom activities. Whether study or travel abroad is a goal or not, the CI method helps culture come alive by introducing students to the real-life situations encountered by

their peers. It also provides a method for reflecting on cultural differences that can be adapted to their developmental levels as they build intercultural competence skills while using the target language. The CI method fits with the paradigm shift that asks world language teachers to reconsider the role of culture in their classrooms. As Wilkins, Calkins & Dinesen (2015) suggest, intercultural learning should be the focus of our classes “while recasting grammar and vocabulary in a supporting role” (p. 1). They advocate for beginning this process on day one of language instruction using a products-practices-perspectives model that can start with simple check lists and classifications that contrast one culture with another as students gain critical cultural awareness about themselves and others. The NCSSFL-ACTFL can-do-statements were updated in 2017 with recommendations like these in mind. In the area of intercultural communication and reflection, for example, sample scenarios are now provided that use the target language in the classroom at all levels, followed by reflections done at home in English or the target language.

Following a similar strategy, critical Incidents like Joe’s Dirty Laundry can be incorporated into a novice-level unit on house-related vocabulary and domestic tasks even though students may not be preparing to live with actual French families. With appropriate scaffolding, students can create lists, categorize and then compare and contrast information to get to the “why” behind cultural differences with limited knowledge of the TL. Matching, multiple choice, and fill-in-the-blank activities can provide the basis for introducing cultural perspectives. Intermediate-level students can recycle this information in the form of a dialogue or debate, or perform a role-play of Joe phoning his parents to tell his laundry story. They can also retell incidents from the perspective of the other culture. For classroom applications of Joe’s Dirty Laundry CI, students can refer to on-line polls in French comparing line-drying to using a clothes dryer. If they have access to key-pals, online conversation partners, or locally-based native-speakers, they can interview them on this topic. Teachers can create a list of useful vocabulary and expressions taken from the on-line forums or interviews to prepare students to compare and contrast cultural practices and values in a small group activity in preparation for an in-class debate. It can be helpful to first make students aware of their own cultural practices by having them report on when they do their laundry, if their family owns a washer and dryer, and if they ever line-dry clothes.<sup>5</sup> Some students may even know of municipalities in the U.S. that prohibit line-drying of clothes as an eyesore, but have never considered the cultural implications of this practice. Discovering cultural differences in their own backyard can be an important first step as students move forward, at their own developmental pace, toward a more global mindset.

## Conclusion

Foreign language teachers may not consider themselves to be intercultural trainers, but we all have stories to tell of misunderstandings that arise from cultural differences. By taking typical authentic experiences such as Joe’s Dirty Laundry, and making them into critical incidents through discussion, reflection and critical analysis, we can help our students develop valuable life-long intercultural skills while using the target language. The foreign language classroom provides a safe

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<sup>5</sup> For example, the online forum listed below generated a vocabulary list that included *se passer de qqch, étendre, un étendoir, écolo, rétrécir, abîmer, les fringues, consommer/bouffer de l’énergie/gaspiller*. See <http://bebes.aufeminin.com/forum/seche-linge-pour-ou-contre-fd2753180>.

space for developing intercultural competence in our students whether study abroad is a goal or not, but the CI approach presented in this paper provides some important caveats to consider as we integrate intercultural perspectives into our teaching. Taking a lesson from research that examines the language/intercultural competence connection in the context of study abroad, as well as Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, this paper highlights the developmental mismatch that can occur between levels of language proficiency and intercultural competence. Subjective culture is notoriously difficult to teach and assess, but developmental models can alert teachers to the stages students move through when reacting to and reflecting on cultural difference as they are prompted to discover the attitudes and values that underlie critical incidents, including their own. By adding the Critical Incident method to our intercultural toolkit, foreign language teachers and intercultural professionals can come that much closer to preparing our students to become the interculturally competent citizens so essential to our global society.

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