



## ESL Learners in the Workplace Using Critical Incidents to Develop Problem-Solving Skills

Using critical incidents in the ESL classroom is one strategy for developing problem-solving skills. A critical incident briefly describes a situation involving members of different cultures where communication has broken down because a language or cultural norm has not been understood or taken into consideration. Using critical incidents is one way ESL teachers can help their students deal with the challenges of American culture while improving their English language proficiency.

Critical incidents have been used in cross-cultural training for many years to prepare Americans going abroad. The Peace Corps Trainer's Resource Guide (1983 Dr. Michael Paige), for example, explains and reinforces the efficacy of using critical incidents. Other authors who embrace this strategy and provide practical suggestions include: Andrea Decapua and Ann Wintergerst, Crossing Cultures in the Language Classroom (2004) and Julia Stakhnevich in "Using Critical Incidents to Teach Cross-cultural Sensitivity" (Internet TESL Journal, March 2002). In addition to cross-cultural sensitivity, Stakhnevich suggests students can "...practice four traditional language skills and exercise their critical thinking." Critical incidents, also used in teacher training, provide opportunities for teachers to reflect on and modify their own teaching.

The writers of this article and other trainers at Spring Institute have incorporated critical incidents into language lessons for limited English speakers. In WorkStyles, an employment readiness training program for refugees at Spring Institute, the incidents describe American workplace situations where both problem-solving and communication skills are needed. Critical incidents provide a basis for skits and role plays and are the focus for small group discussions. The strategy of using critical incidents prepares people to deal with problem situations by moving from descriptions of problem situations to discussions of possible solutions to discovering how these solutions "feel" through skits and role plays.

The strategy of writing and implementing critical incidents successfully is essential for teachers to help their students think critically and respond appropriately to unfamiliar situations. While Spring Institute utilizes critical incidents primarily to deal with the challenges of both the social and the employment aspects of American work culture, this approach to problem solving is useful with adults, high school students, anyone trying to make a decision that involves

overcoming a barrier to reaching a goal. As a result, the strategy is also effective with people from the same or similar languages or cultural backgrounds.

The attachments are handouts that accompanied conference workshops on the use of critical incidents presented at CAEPA (Colorado Adult Education Professional Association) in October 2010 and at CoTESOL (Colorado Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) in November 2010.

Suzanne Saenz, WorkStyles Program Manager, Spring Institute  
Barbara Sample, Director of Educational Services, Spring Institute

## Using Critical Incidents to Develop Problem-Solving Skills

### WHY use critical incidents?

- They help participants develop effective communication skills
- They promote active listening skills necessary for good communication
  - Listen, Repeat back what you understand, Allow the speaker to clarify if you've misunderstood
- They provide an arena to practice problem-solving skills while using active listening strategies
- They provide participants with steps to think about when they come upon an uncomfortable situation
  - This situation is uncomfortable... why? what is the problem?
  - If the problem is not obvious, don't be afraid to ask questions. Realizing there is a problem is often a difficult step for many, not only newcomers to the USA. Also, developing confidence to talk about it and ask questions is difficult for many.
  - Practice active listening
- They enlighten participants to the fact that there are often many appropriate solutions for a difficult or uncomfortable situation
- Discussions on critical incidents will contribute to the success of each participant in life, on the job, at school, and with family members

### WHERE/WHEN are critical incidents useful?

- In adult education classrooms
- With students/participants who have communicative English, even if at a low level.
- With school age children – all ages – where critical incidents are realistic, authentic, and age appropriate

### HOW can critical incidents be utilized effectively by teachers, trainers, and facilitators?

- By creating a framework and establishing agreements between teachers and participants before reading/analyzing each critical incident
  - Read one as a whole group first; ask: What is the problem? What is a solution?
  - Remind participants to listen respectfully to each other, even if they don't agree
  - Assign duties to small group participants: leader, scribe, presenter, timekeeper
  - Encourage each participant to voice an opinion
  - Agree that sometimes one solution may be appropriate in one culture, but not another
- By encouraging active listening strategies (Listen, repeat/paraphrase, listen again) for each case study as participants voice their suggestions for solutions
- By creating relevant, authentic critical incidents (consider English level, students' ages, adults, professionals, purpose of class, etc.)
- By consciously *not* providing any solutions so that participants are encouraged to implement critical thinking.....there is often more than one appropriate solution
- By listening carefully to each participant's suggestion; although this is not a grammar lesson, hearing errors can lead to appropriate lesson planning for later activities



## **Beginner Level Critical Incidents for Solving Problems on the Job:**

### **B1 - Fong and the Restaurant Job**

One month ago, Fong got his first job in America. He is a cook in a small restaurant. Now he is getting bored with his job. It's not interesting for him. Fong's English is not good, and cooking is the only work he does well. He wants to quit his job and find a better one.

*What's the problem? Should Fong quit his job now?*

### **B2 - Lu and the Office Job**

Today Lu is starting her new job as office clerk. Her friend is going to give Lu a ride to work. Then her friend calls and says he is sick. It's getting late. Lu doesn't know anyone else with a car. She doesn't know about buses.

*What's the problem? What should Lu do?*

## **Intermediate Level Critical Incidents for Solving Problems on the Job:**

### **I1 - Boris and the Shoe Store Job**

Today Boris started his new job at the shoe store. The manager took Boris to the stock room. He showed Boris a large pile of shoe boxes. Then the manager said, "Please put all these boxes of shoes on the shelves. Do you know how to do this?" Boris said, "Yes," and the manager left the store. Now Boris is alone in the stock room. He looks at the boxes, but doesn't know how to put them on the shelves. He starts putting the boxes on the shelves, but he is not sure if he is doing it right.

*What's the problem? What should Boris do?*

### **I2 - Kim and the Housekeeping Job**

Kim takes care of the guest rooms in a big motel. She just started yesterday. The manager trained her. She told Kim to work fast and to do these things:

- 1) Put clean sheets on the beds.
- 2) Vacuum the rugs.
- 3) Clean the bathroom and put clean towels on the racks.
- 4) Empty the wastebaskets.

Today Kim was very busy, and she really hurried. She couldn't remember everything the manager told her. She forgot to put clean towels in one room. She didn't clean the sink in another room. Two motel guests asked the manager to refund their money.

*What's the problem? What should Kim do?*

### **I3 - Inez and the Gas Station Job**

Inez works in a gas station. She puts gas in the cars. She cleans the windshield. Sometimes she checks the oil and water and tires. She takes money and makes change. Sometimes she sells small parts for cars. When there aren't any cars, Inez sits in the restroom and reads her book. Her boss is very unhappy about that.

*What's the problem? What should Inez do?*

## **Advanced Level Critical Incidents for Solving Problems on the Job:**

### **A1 - Ben's Machine**

Ben's boss wants him to work on a new machine. The boss shows him how to do the job. Ben tells the boss he understands, and the boss goes back to his office.

For one or two times, everything works well. Then the machine makes a terrible noise, and ruins all the work. Ben tries to stop the machine, but he doesn't know how. He pushes the wrong button, and the machine goes faster and breaks more things.

*What's the problem? What should Ben do?*

### **A2 - Victor's English-speaking Boss**

Victor has six years of experience as a butcher in a meat packing company. Victor always had the same supervisor who explained everything in Victor's language. In his new job, many things are the same, but the supervisor tells Victor to do some things differently. His supervisor only speaks English, and he speaks so fast that Victor sometimes doesn't understand. Then he smiles and does the work the same way he did it for six years. The supervisor is very angry. He thinks Victor is stubborn and doesn't want to obey orders.

*What's the problem? What should Victor do?*

### **A3 - Eva's Missing Tips**

Eva has been working at Roy's Cafe for three years. She is a good waitress, and she gets lots of tips for good service. Last month Pam started work as a waitress. She works at tables near Eva. Last week the restaurant was crowded, but Eva noticed that she was not getting many tips. Eva feels sure that Pam is stealing her tips, but she can't prove it.

*What's the problem? What should Eva do?*

### **A4 - Eugene and his Pretty Co-Worker (No Means No)**

Eugene arrived in the United States 6 months ago and has been working as a salesman in a clothing store for 3 months. One month ago he became friends with his co-worker, Sally, a long-time employee. They talk every day. He likes her and wanted to ask her out on a date, but she said "No." But he asked her again and again and again every day, hoping she would finally say "Yes." He also tried to give her a hug one day. This made her angry and she complained to her supervisor. The supervisor gave Eugene a warning and let him know that this kind of behavior could lead to being fired.

*What was the problem? What should Eugene do?*