

Role models in HEI language learning: Critical incidents as a way to language competences and learner autonomy

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Abstract: People interact as part of social encounters within varied educational, professional, or free-time contexts. These interactions breed numerous opportunities to meet people who become an important source of inspiration, motivation, and learning. This text explores critical incidents as an effective means of capturing these interactions for future reflection in the learning process in the context of HEIs' (higher education institutions) language education. Critical incidents are vivid memorable life events that have significance for the person concerned. Retold or rewritten in the form of narratives, they have enjoyed wide application in a range of disciplines from medicine, nursing to education as well-established, tested methodologies. This paper introduces the use of the Critical Incident Cycle (CIC) in the context of a Master's degree course in Business English at Škoda Auto University (SAU) as a tool for enhancing students' reflection on their learning experience to consolidate their language proficiencies and learning.

From the critical incident narratives collected, role models emerged as one of the dominant factors influencing the students' learning and personal growth. This study provides empirical evidence of how the role models in these cases contribute to the formation of young people's ideals, behaviors, and actions vis-à-vis self-development, language and communication skills set, and life-long learning. This paper argues that CIC provides a methodologically robust means for learners to actively enhance their learning outcomes through critical self-reflection of key aspects of their individual learning process.

Key words: critical incidents, role model, personal development, higher education institution, language education, learner autonomy, life-long learning

1 Introduction

Some speculate that artificial intelligence may take over numerous functions in human communication at the time of Industry 4.0. These ideas of course impact how people think about teaching, and learning foreign languages, including policy-makers deciding on future educational strategies in Europe. Tendencies to dispute the 1+2 strategy (Council of the EU, 2014, p. 1) can be traced in some European countries believing that gadgets and applications will be able to largely simulate communication functions in foreign language contact. The job market, however, shows the opposite trend. People-oriented professions tend to take the lead at the time of sophisticated technologies (OECD, 2019) enhancing the urge for efficient international cooperation, intercultural communication, and social cohesion for which strong foreign language skills as part of the professional 21st century

skills set are a prerequisite. Critical Incidents (CIs) – written narrations of real-life situations carrying a significance to a person concerned – cited in this study from the perspective of HEIs students present some ways how this may be achieved. They provide a truly student-centered and context-based approach because each learner reflects on their individual needs, aims and responses to a given situation, in this case the use of English as a foreign language to achieve concrete ends through an autonomously defined strategy. In fact, the reflection that comes from adopting the Critical Incident Cycle (CIC) model described below can clarify the learner’s own learning process and thus place learning more under their control as this paper will demonstrate.

1.1 Agents of socialization

Many of the desired skills are learned through socialization. Besides schools, the main agents of socialization are family, free time activities, hobbies, and later work, which are a source of communication situations and linguistic input, and help teach principles of interaction. In these settings, people are influenced by role models – individuals who inspire as an example to be admired, respected, and followed by others for their ideas, behavior, or success.

The term “role models” was first defined by Robert K. Merton (Calhoun, 2010) according to whom people tend to compare themselves with those who are similar or achieved goals that they look up to, and thus, play a role as exemplars for others’ aspirations. Role models are therefore important in forming people’s personalities, ambitions, and goals, especially for the young. It is parents, siblings, or relatives in families, teachers, and classmates in school, friends in free time activities, peers and instructors, advisors, or coaches pursuing mutual hobbies, and colleagues and supervisors later at work who inscribe into young people’s educational and professional career path.

Socialization processes and social interaction, of course, play an inseparable role in foreign language learning and teaching. Efforts to form language teaching approaches to better fit natural social interaction, apply to varied practical contexts, and reflect the variation in individual needs can be traced as language teaching approaches and methodologies developed and where they arrived today. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to contribute to the enhancement of language education by investigating students’ language learning from those who form their attitudes and motivation in wider learning contexts.

1.2 Critical incident research

Critical incidents (CIs) represent life situations that catch a person unprepared. As such, they evoke emotions, activate thoughts, assume quick decisions, and incite

an action. Remaining deeply ingrained in memory, they get revisited, re-evaluated and used as experience forming the person's future behavior. As personal narratives, storytelling, anecdotal remarks, or elicited in a dialogue orally or in writing, CIs found use as an established qualitative research method carrying practical implications in multiple disciplines.

The Critical Incident Technique (CIT) used for research purposes and practical implications was first described by John Flanagan in 1954 as a tool for measuring the effectiveness of behaviors in American military practice (Flanagan, 1954). Upon adoption in the field of psychology to study personality and human behavior in varied professions (Flanagan, 1954), the technique was established as a qualitative research method and later spread to other fields, such as psychological counselling, nursing, dentistry, marketing, social work, or educational practice (Butterfield, 2005).

This study draws upon the later application of the CIT in the field of intercultural studies and education (e. g., Apedaile and Schill, 2008; Brislin, 1986; Cope and Watts, 2000; Spencer-Oatey, 2013; Thomas, 2010; Tripp, 1993; Wight, 1995). This research discontinued using CIs as a sole "task analysis tool" and started treating them as an "investigative and exploratory tool" (Butterfield et al., 2005, p. 489), which allowed for taking the CI participant's reflective retrospection into the researcher consideration. This allowed to see CIs as "moments of prime importance" (Cope and Watts, 2000, p. 112) as "turning points in a person's life" (Tripp, 1993). Needless to say that this new approach can prove to be fertile opportunities to enhance, among other things, self-awareness and autonomous learning in real-life, socio-culturally constituted contexts.

This potential for more active learner engagement through CIs was recently introduced in an Erasmus+ international partnership project Critical Incidents in Intercultural Cooperation and Promoting Diversity (CIICPD) conducted between 2020 and 2013 in cooperation with five HEIs: Škoda Auto University in Czechia, Westsächsischen Hochschule Zwickau in Germany, University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria in Austria, University of Siena in Italy, and Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences in Finland. This project pursued multidisciplinary perspectives of CIs in language education, intercultural communication and diversity management with the aim of developing innovative curricula to be implemented into the schools' programs. Specific topics examined were intercultural studies in Germany, corporate environment in Czechia, business and academic settings in Austria, financial and banking studies in Italy, and language teaching practice in Finland (Sieglová et al., 2023). As part of the intellectual outputs of these HEIs' collaborative efforts, innovative curricula were implemented into the schools' programs and pedagogical and training materials for varied educational and professional practice were brought forward. The Critical Incident Cycle (CIC) (Sieglová,

2023) described below is one of those tools developed for pedagogical use in modern language education.

2 Methodology

This study draws on CIs collected at Škoda Auto University in Mladá Boleslav, Czechia. Material used for the analyses below was taken from a robust database of CIs compiling data since 2016 in a Master's degree program Business English language course, while adopting the new findings and analytical and methodological tools developed within the course of the CIICPD project ran between 2020 and 2023. The objectives of the course are not only to foster the learners' language skills but also to ground them in the language competences and intercultural skills required within the academic setting in their mandatory internships, that is, to cultivate their learner autonomy both in the classroom and beyond.

Using thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun and Clarke, 2006; Boyatzis, 1998), approximately 500 CI narrations from the database were first categorized to identify the leading themes through coding, sorting, and classifying data into thematic categories, out of which role models as key contributors to the students' personal development created a separate category. Six sample situations demonstrating the formative role of teachers and job advisors in the students' language learning and personal development were selected for the analysis below to examine the social dynamics of the academic and professional environment between the students and their supervisors. Particular attention was paid to the impact of the role models on language learning, personal growth, and learner autonomy, especially how they promote or impede the process of learning.

2.1 The Critical Incident Cycle

The student CI narrations analyzed below follow a general structure adopting the 3RA tool (report – reflect – reevaluate – act), as described by Spencer-Oatey and Davidson (2013, p. 1). Each student narrative started with a description of the circumstances of the critical moment, including the participants, setting, and scene in which they took place (Report). Then, they accounted for their first-hand reflections, including emotions, interpretations, and moves (Reflect). Finally, they added extended interpretations and their realizations of their own roles and learning (Reevaluate), and how these were reflected in their future decisions, behaviors, and actions (Act). This format, then, allowed for the adoption of the Critical Incident Cycle (CIC) model (Sieglova, 2023) (Figure 1) for the analyses of this study. The potential for greater autonomy afforded by this model is evident in the steps described showing how the students build an understanding of their own learning process grounded in their lived experience.

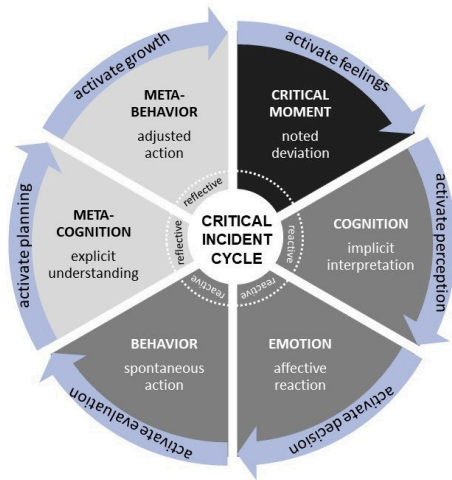


Fig. 1: *The Critical Incident Cycle* (Sieglová, 2023)

What makes CIs in general and these samples in particular valuable is that each CI starts with a series of immediate reactions that respond to a deviation from normality (critical incident) followed by an affective reaction (emotion) derived from an implicit interpretation (cognition) and a corresponding action (behavior) in response to the event. For their emotional intensity, CIs are ingrained in memory, and as such, allow for reassessment and reevaluation in retrospect. That is, upon the immediate series of reactions (emotion – cognition – behavior), the CIs get revisited on a metacognitive and meta-behavioral level. This means that with time, new realizations are made, wider contextual understanding is sought, and explicit interpretations are drawn (metacognition). After that, new decisions and plans, as well as corresponding behavioral adjustments are made and implemented in future actions (meta-behavior). From this perspective, the student CI analyses help shed light on the process of transforming the students’ implicit emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions, into explicit reasoning, broader understanding, and behavioral adjustments as controlled decisions and actions in the future. Based on this, the CIC model can not only be used as an analytical tool for the students, but also as a didactic tool for the teachers providing an approach to learning that takes learner-centeredness and recasts it as an open-ended enterprise helping the learners identify the learning moments.

3 Data analysis

In order to illustrate individual stages of the students’ learning processes, the sample analyses below follow the structure of the CIC model. Upon the reporting

part, in which the students introduce the context of each CI, the analyses focus on the students' descriptions of the critical moment, that is, how they identify their immediate emotions triggered (emotion), perceptions made (cognition), and actions taken (behavior). Then, a discussion of the student reflections follows, pointing out the students' new interpretations, plans and decisions formed (metacognition) and behavioral changes implemented (meta-behavior).

3.1 Teachers as role models

Teachers play an important role as guides, moderators, and mentors. They have a great potential to activate motivation for language learning, but, as shown below, may also demotivate. CIC specifically targets this issue of role model pedagogical efficacy. Learners in the course concerned had an opportunity in the form of CI narratives to comment on their learning in relation to role models, pinpoint the dynamics of this relationship, and better identify their own agency while simultaneously using the target language in an explicitly meaningful manner. The analyses below focus on identifying the factors of teachers as role models and their impact on their students' success or failure. The extracts quoted from the students' narratives are kept in italics and left in their raw form for the sake of authenticity. Only minor precision or spelling corrections were made to facilitate intelligibility.

3.1.1 Critical incident 1 – Teacher of economics

The first situation highlights teacher behavior that widely deviated from the expectations of a role model. The incident took place during an economics course as part of a Czech student's Erasmus+ exchange in an English language program in Austria during her bachelor's studies. The student opened her narrative with background information about her language situation within the course (Table 1, Extract 1.1), indicating the source of her struggles in the situation described.

Tab. 1: *Critical Incident 1 – Extract 1.1*

<p><i>Extract 1.1: I studied there in English and the whole half a year was again a huge challenge. I adapted myself very good to the new environment and culture as I had all classes with students from all around the world except of Economics, where were only Austrian students whose English level is mostly C2.</i></p>

By comparing her previous experience with using English as a foreign language in non-native environments against the contact with her Austrian classmates in the Economics course, subjectively seen as reaching the native speaker competence levels, the student not only indicated feeling disadvantaged within the class due to her lower language skills, but also revealed her low language self-esteem. This becomes further apparent from an aside comment (Table 2, Extract 1.2) inserted in the reporting part.

Tab. 2: *Critical Incident 1 – Extract 1.2*

Extract 1.2: *Before I start to describe the critical incident, let me tell you something about myself. My parents invested in my German an English language a lot. I have visited languages schools, went to England many times but unfortunately, I have never learnt so much as I would like to as I a more technical then humanities person. Somehow, I am stuck in B2/C1 level.*

The student's low self-confidence in her language aptitudes reflected in her self-assessment of own competencies inferior to her classmates, then, set the foundation for how she further described and interpreted the incident from the lesson (Table 3, Extract 1.3).

Tab. 3: *Critical Incident 1 – Extract 1.3*

Extract 1.3: *During the semester we had to write thesis and I was the first student who handed it in. One week later during seminar, the mentor firstly praised me for handing it in so early and for nice wrapping and then he continued to criticize my English. The whole lecture theatre, full of almost 100 students have heard how horrible my English is, that it is nonsense for me to be there and study this subject.*

And indeed, seeing her language skills as a great handicap stands as the first-hand interpretation of her immediate feelings. While perceiving the teacher feedback as stern criticism and a dubitation of her abilities to complete the course, the intense exposure to the lecture hall audience resulted in her feeling of loss of face. This became apparent from the following remarks when she pointed out feeling “*ashamed*” and “*disgraced in front of another students*”. These feelings seem to have further intensified her self-doubt, as found in the upcoming comments on her immediate behavioral reactions. Finding this situation “*difficult to handle*”, the student expressed her disappointment from being unable to take any action as a summary of her immediate reaction in the lesson (Table 4, Extract 1.4).

Tab. 4: *Critical Incident 1 – Extract 1.4*

Extract 1.4: *I have not done anything. I was completely caught out by that. I had no words which I could have said in that moment.*

Within the metacognitive and meta-behavioral reevaluation of the incident, however, the student brought more context showing a greater ability to self-reflect as well as seek alternative interpretations of the teacher's act, which she elaborated upon in the next part of her writing (Table 5, Extract 1.5).

A few metacognitive realizations can be traced in this section. First, despite her perceived language disadvantage, she found herself to be a generally hard working, result-oriented person, and a successful student determined to make conscious efforts to improve her English skills. This was evident not only from her controlled time-management apparent from the early submission of the assign-

Tab. 5: *Critical Incident 1 – Extract 1.5*

Extract 1.5: *For comparison I have been quite successful in other subjects. In the end of semester, I learned for the final exams over a month and learnt five economics word every day and I passes the exam on grade 4. I my opinion, he just wanted to give me some motivation through his speech, what should have made me to think about myself and my English. I always persuade myself, that he really wanted me to try harder and improve my English. I think he has not realized what he was saying in that moment and what impact would it have on me and my reputation.*

ment, but also from her quite confident self-assessment of general study results. Second, the student also tried to reevaluate the teacher's critique as a possible effort to motivate her to work harder. Finally, despite feeling offended, she refuted the wrong intentions in the teacher's account.

What is more, this experience seems to result in the student's realizations on meta-behavioral level helping her set up plans and decisions for her future behavior and actions. Despite the offensive nature of the incident, the student found a number of positive effects of the incident on her personal development, as presented in Table 8.

To begin, she reported realizing that the incident made her more resilient to negative feedback and helped her learn to accept criticism (Table 6, Extract 1.6). She also pointed out the need for improving the quality of relationship and communication between teachers and students calling for more respect and diplomacy (Table 6, Extract 1.7), recognizing that a positive atmosphere in the classroom and respect for individual personalities is crucial for maximizing the learning effect for all. In addition, this incident led the student to set up a new plan for a more suitable reaction in analogic situations in the future (Table 6, Extract 1.8). In fact, the situation seems to have activated the student to intensify her studies and could have even contributed to better results in the Economic course (Table 6, Extract 1.9).

Tab. 6: *Critical Incident 1 – Extracts 1.6–1.9*

Extract 1.6: *I learned that it does not matter how hard you try or how successful you are, there is always going to be someone who will criticize you no matter what.*

Extract 1.7: *If someone want to reproach you your imperfections, he must communicate it in privacy.*

Extract 1.8: *Next time I would behave differently. I should have solved it with the director of University or at least tell him that the mentor behaves inappropriately.*

Extract 1.9: *It really motivated me a little bit to learn more. I learnt a lot for the final exam, which I passed.*

Yet, despite the fact that this situation rather than leading to the student's resignation stirred her self-assertion and activated her intensified efforts, it was no

doubt an example of a rather insensitive approach on the side of the teacher. This affair while deserving a more diplomatic solution, raised numerous questions in the context of language learning, namely, the attitude to and resolution of inaccuracies, the significance of creating a positive learning atmosphere, the importance of respecting students' personality traits and study styles, the meaning of proper feedback, or the need to redefine the relationship between the teacher and student in the area of mutual relationships and communication. This became evident from the student's concluding remark (Table 7, Extract 1.10) showing a deepening self-esteem in her language competences.

Tab. 7: *Critical Incident 1 – Extract 1.10*

Extract 1.10: *I also had to think about my personality and I realized that languages are not the field of study that I am good at.*

Indeed, contrary to realizing her academic strengths, developing an ability to assert her rights and accept criticism, this incident reinforced the student's low initial self-esteem in her language aptitudes and resulted in a conclusion which was, given her academic abilities and results as well as a strong will, detrimental to her language learning potential. Regardless of the fact the context being not an EFL classroom, an approach less concerned with linguistic 'accuracy' and more attuned to learner competency might yield both desirable linguistic results and the enhancement of other professional skills.

3.1.2 Critical incident 2 – English language summer course teacher

An example of good practice took place during a one-week summer English language course in a town in South Moravia. The course teacher was a native speaker of English from Canada. The CI here took place during an evening informal extracurricular activity with the students and other Canadian teachers (Table 8, Extract 2.1).

Tab. 8: *Critical Incident 2 – Extract 2.1*

Extract 2.1: *I remember one evening the main Canadian lector sat next to me and some other Czech students and started to speak to us about our English. He said that we speak very well even if we think it's not a true. He highlighted that we shouldn't care about making mistakes and just speak. Other people will understand us even if we speak with mistakes. The important thing is that we can still have an interesting conversation and fun with them. It had a huge effect on my life.*

During the evening activity, the teacher developed a conversation about the excessive accent on language accuracy which he believed impaired the students' self-confidence in their language skills and resulted in hesitancy to participate in spoken activities. This was further confirmed by the student's following interpretation of the teacher's comments (Table 9, Extract 2.2). In the analytical part of her

narrative the student pointed out the main factor that finally led her to be more proactive in using the language. The activities she found the most effective during the whole course were according to her those informal encounters together with the teachers creating a safe learning atmosphere (Table 9, Extract 2.3).

Tab. 9: *Critical Incident 2 – Extracts 2.2–2.3*

Extract 2.2: *I think this lector spoke to us because he saw we were afraid to talk with them and wanted to change that. He wanted to increase our self-confidence in this area and assure us that we shouldn't be scared to speak with others in English.*

Extract 2.3: *As the most beneficial I see the activities we did together at the evenings when the atmosphere was more relaxed.*

As a result of the conversation between her and the teacher, the student reported a few realizations as well as behavioral changes on the metacognitive and meta-behavioral level implemented in her future beliefs and actions. These were mainly in the area of increased self-confidence (Table 10, Extract 2.4), which helped her gain composure (Table 10, Extract 2.5), and change her attitude toward occasional precision issues (Table 10, Extract 2.6).

Tab. 10: *Critical Incident 2 – Extracts 2.4–2.6*

Extract 2.4: *I should believe more in my skills and not to underestimate myself.*

Extract 2.5: *I've learned to put aside my discomfort and be more relaxed when talking in English with foreigners.*

Extract 2.6: *I sometimes say this to myself just to remind myself that I shouldn't be afraid to speak in English and shouldn't mind doing some minor mistakes.*

A wider impact on her future decisions and actions is evident from the following claims pointing out adopting a more proactive attitude in seeking opportunities for foreign language practice (Table 11, Extract 2.7), which indicated an extended effect of a single incident in broader contexts and sets of activities. What is more, the student became an ambassador of the realizations made while sharing her experience with her social networks (Table 11, Extract 2.8).

Tab. 11: *Critical Incident 2 – Extracts 2.7–2.8*

Extract 2.7: *"without this incident, today [she] wouldn't seek new opportunities to speak in English and to travel abroad,"*

Extract 2.8: *"message among [her] friends who struggle a bit with speaking in English mainly because of their fear of doing grammar mistakes."*

This scenario shows that the educators' method may count as much as their manner. More informal, friendly relationships with students and a more generous attitude to language inaccuracies on the side of the teacher proved to have a great impact not only on the student self-confidence, but also on her willingness to reassess her attitudes and take a more proactive approach to language practice in the future. As shown above, in particular circumstances, language teachers may be able to engage their students more efficiently through words of encouragement delivered as the level of a peer rather than an expert, as well as through casual interactions they as teachers would seek to promote. This means, in addition to developing professional communication skills, an occasional informal chat should stand as an inseparable element of a language classroom.

3.1.3 Critical incident 3 – Business communication teacher

The teacher's approach to a student's self-confidence became the main theme of the next situation, too. This time, the CI happened in a formal setting of an English Business Communications Skills course with a more formal teacher – student relationship. Yet, this situation shows that a professional approach to students reflecting wider social variables can engender similar positive results, as summarized in the extract from the reporting part of the narrative (Table 12, Extract 3.1).

Tab. 12: *Critical Incident 3 – Extract 3.1*

Extract 3.1: *In the first year of my bachelor studies, I attended a seminar where I had to oppose my classmate's presentation. I got a written form of her presentation in advance and I had to find parts/claims that could be questioned. My classmate had a really good presentation about Italy and as she was partly Italian I didn't believe I could come up with something good that would make her words less truth. Still, I prepared four arguments. After her interesting presentation, I had to speak. Before I started, I apologized about two times for my 'probably stupid ideas' and I read them all real quick and apologized again. The classroom full of people was quiet, then one of my classmates said that those were not that stupid arguments and started to analyze some of my ideas. The teacher added that my arguments could have been quite good, and some of them could have started a really good debate, but I ruined that potential by my own low self-esteem. The teacher told me 'next time, believe in your work more'. It was not a pleasant experience for me, but it was an essential one.*

In this situation, the student self-criticism and lack of self-confidence in her communication and critical thinking skills, which were revealed in her repetitive apologies, hastened performance, and overcritical self-evaluation, in the end negatively affected the positive potential of the student comments. Needless to say that to provide negative feedback, the teacher risked a similar detrimental effect confirming the student self-doubt as in the first CI analyzed above. The teacher, however, took advantage of the peer positive comments to create targeted constructive feedback backed-up by the peer perspective. This resulted in the student acceptance of the teacher feedback, reevaluation of her own attitudes, and a positive change in the metacognitive and meta-behavioral level. This can be read in the concluding remark (Table 13, Extract 3.2).

Tab. 13: *Critical Incident 3 – Extract 3.2*

Extract 3.2: “Nowadays, when I prepare for something, I believe in a happy ending. I don’t create horror scenarios in my head, I don’t question my work right before I have to show it to someone. I believe that my effort was sufficient and if not I don’t call myself stupid. I usually decide to work harder next time, without any self-humiliation. I learned that I should not underestimate myself.”

Teacher behavior along the formality/informality spectrum will always, in fact must be, adjusted and readjusted given the educational requirements. In sum, this situation was an example of a proper student-centered approach and a diplomatic way to critique that lead to a positive change in the student’s self-esteem and her future decisions and actions. It indicates that social context is a tricky but potent variable that can be used not only against but also in favor of the students and a proper choice of format and channel is crucial. Regarding communication skills, public criticism is acceptable if it is adjusted to the student’s personality, delivered in a supportive atmosphere, contrasted with positive feedback, and secured by a social agreement. The student, even though humbled by her poor performance at the moment of her debate, recognized the value of this experience in the form of a changed attitude toward challenge and herself thanks to an agile and professional teacher approach.

3.2 Critical incident 4 – Czech language teacher

Similarly, a subtle teacher approach to not only feedback but also student personality can be traced in the next CI. This time, the situation was set in a Czech language course for foreigners and the student participant who was to deliver a presentation came from Ukraine. The CI introduced below (Table 14, Extract 4.1) is a situation of an unsuccessful first attempt to present a topic in a professional subject by a student non-native speaker of the language of instruction. The narrative includes a description of the student’s emotional feelings of uneasiness at the moment, as well as his firsthand behavioral reaction in the form of an apology to all the participants. This indicates the student’s full awareness of failure. He, at the same time, obviously resigned from seeking any strategy to save his speech.

Tab. 14: *Critical Incident 4 – Extract 4.1*

Extract 4.1: *I had a problem with my learned speech circa two years ago. I learned a speech, but word by word, and when I came in front of the audience, I didn’t know anything from my prepared speech. It was very embarrassed. I apologized for it to my classmates and teacher.*

Being able to diagnose the student’s problem and reflect his personality is an important skill a teacher should adopt. She, of course, could have the student failed. But instead, obviously reflecting the core of his problem was not a poor or reckless preparation, but the wrong approach to training presentation skills,

she made a corresponding decision, as evident from the student's description of the following series of action (Table 15, Extract 4.2). Thus, she not only prevented him from failure but also gave him a chance to gain composure and deliver a more controlled speech.

Tab. 15: *Critical Incident 4 – Extract 4.2*

Extract 4.2: *The teacher let me sit down and have a rest for a while. This rest helped me a lot. I became calmer and then I presented my speech safely.*

As a result of this experience, the student made several realizations contributing to his self-development. For example, he admits learning that memorizing speeches may impair awareness of the whole context (Table 16, Extract 4.3) and in combination with a stage fright (Table 16, Extract 4.4), they may result in black-outs. Besides realizations on the metacognitive level, he also suggested adjustment plans for the future laying down relevant strategies to prevent failing his presentations. These included not only strategies for the preparation of the content but also strategies for rehearsals (Table 16, Extract 4.5). The implementation of these strategy plans on the meta-behavioral level, finally, is then evident from the conclusion of his experience (Table 16, Extract 4.6).

Tab. 16: *Critical Incident 4 – Extracts 4.3–4.6*

Extract 4.3: *If a person learns something word for word, then it could happen that if he forgets one word, he doesn't know the whole text.*

Extract 4.4: *Another reason was that I was nervous in front of my classmates.*

Extract 4.5: *I definitely learned from this incident that I shouldn't learn my speeches word by word. If I look at it from today's point of view, then I wouldn't have learned the text directly word by word, but made a content and memorized only the keywords. For example, I would try to say it several times and always in a little differently way.*

Extract 4.6: *Every time from this incident I prepare my speech, but not in whole sentences and I'm not learning it word by word. Now I also care about the preparation of presentations, but I no longer write the full texts. I try to be more calm during individual presentations. However, this is very difficult for me. I can't handle stress as good as I want to, but I'm trying to work on it.*

In sum, this situation showed the significance of a compassionate approach of a teacher to a student not only from the perspective of student personality, but also of study styles and efforts. The fact that the student was able to regain his composure and deliver his presentation at the second attempt indicates that a well-suited, empathetic, and professional approach has a beneficial impact on the student resulting in the development of individual strategies incorporated in their own learning.

3.3 Bosses as role models

Since the students participating in this study were required to undertake a mandatory internship in their fifth' semester of their studies, the second crucial area of their life is their professional training. Besides teachers, their advisors and colleagues from their internships frequently serve role as role models also influencing their language learning. In this section, two situations were selected to demonstrate the role of supervisors in forming the students' motivation and self-confidence in the area of language training.

3.3.1 Critical Incident 5 – A Czech boss

The first incident from an internship chosen for analysis happened in Prague but to a student from a foreign country. Czech was her foreign language which she needed to learn and use for both, professional and personal purposes. Similar to the previous incident, she shares an experience when delivering a presentation, this time, however, as a salesperson presenting products to her customers (Table 17, Extract 5.1).

Tab. 17: *Critical Incident 5 – Extract 5.1*

Extract 5.1: The incident happened in my first job, five years ago, in a large company in the center of Prague. I had to present luxury cosmetics. I was trained directly by the boss and his wife, who were very strict to me. I was afraid that I couldn't make a good presentation in a foreign language (Czech). My boss told me that he gave me only one attempt and decided to be present at my first presentation, not giving me the opportunity to make a trial version without a client. Afraid to fail, I did an excellent presentation, without making a single mistake.

Placing the student in discomfort, as described above, was definitely a risk for the manager, as the student due to a lack of self-confidence or stress could fail and thus damage the company image or sales. Her boss, however, properly recognized her aptitudes as well as personality and implemented a corresponding approach. As evident from the student's reflection (Table 18, Extract 5.2), by pushing her out of her comfort zone, she believed he helped her to achieve her potential. She also made further realizations about her reserves (Table 18, Extract 5.3) on the one side, abilities and skills (Table 18, Extract 5.4) as well as ambitions (Table 18, Extract 5.5) on the other.

In the final accounts, the student laid down the positive outcomes from this event proving its extended implementation into her future actions. First, she expressed appreciation of this experience boosting her confidence and efforts in foreign language performance and learning (Table 19, Extract 5.6). She also admitted a strengthened work initiative finding a direct link between the efforts and success in her career path (Table 19, Extract 5.7). Similarly, she noticed this experi-

Tab. 18: *Critical Incident 5 – Extracts 5.2–5.5*

Extract 5.2: *I think that my boss knew that my level of the language was high enough, so he understood that I was embarrassed and need to push for decisive action. He put me in tough conditions to help me unleash my potential and stop being afraid.*

Extract 5.3: *I think that I should have taken the initiative myself and not wait for tough measures.*

Extract 5.4: *I have to admit that I was well prepared for the presentation that day*

Extract 5.5: *It helped me not to lose face. If I blundered, it would be a tragedy for me, because this was my first year abroad and my first job.*

ence advanced her socially (Table 19, Extract 5.8) and gain general self-confidence in her abilities and talents (Table 19, Extract 5.9).

Tab. 19: *Critical Incident 5 – Extracts 5.6–5.9*

Extract 5.6: *I am glad it happened to me. Since then, I have no fear of speaking Czech, freely communicate and work on it.*

Extract 5.7: *I always show initiative in my work, already more than eight chiefs were satisfied with my enterprise.*

Extract 5.8: *This incident helped me become more sociable, self-confident and successful.*

Extract 5.9: *This case showed me that I am able to cope with work in a stressful situation and improvise.*

In comparison to teachers as role models, this situation shows how language learning and communication skills can develop beyond the classrooms. What is more, with regards to the learner autonomy, it invites learners to assess their experience in terms of their own needs. A canny supervisor can provide equivalent service to the student personal development in general, and language and communication skills development in particular. The manager mentioned in this situation showed a great deal of professional intuition and leadership skills in guiding the student through her progress. Being able to properly recognize the student personality and assess her capabilities, he gave her trust and the opportunity to perform, he helped her challenge discomfort, and thus, helped her unveil her potential.

3.4 Critical incident 6 – A British boss

The second situation set in the context of a student internship, and the last analysis in this study, refers to the same student who experienced the criticism during her Erasmus+ study abroad in one of her lessons in economics in Austria analyzed in Critical Incident 1 above. This time, the student shared her language learning

experience from working in a logistics department for an automotive company in the United Kingdom. In the reporting part, she acknowledged her struggles with the British accent in the earlier months of her stay (Table 20, Extract 6.1).

Tab. 20: *Critical Incident 6 – Extract 6.1*

Extract 6.1: *During my bachelor studies, I signed internship contract with Bentley Motors Ltd. in United Kingdom. As I have never had worked for a company with such a reputation before, I was looking forward to it! I expected from the internship, that I will gain new practical experiences, meet new people, colleagues and improve my language. Before I came to England I learned English during in my high school, in language schools and I used English in communication with people from various countries. My boss Bob was 53-years old man, who was very kind, calm, optimistic, helpful and talkative, had the typical British accent and dialect. First two months I had huge problem to understand. Even though he was native speaker, I could not have understood a word. It took me more than three months to understand at least something.*

In the following reflections, the student further recalled numerous situations when communicating with her boss, deeming his positive nature, personality, and attitudes to employees as the core of her “positive experience” in this case. In the reflective part of her narrative, she pointed out a few strategies she and her boss adopted to find mutual understanding. One of the strategies she identified in her supervisor’s management style was maintaining an informal relationship and communication with his employees which is also evident from her calling him by his first name (Table 21, Extract 6.2) which seemed to help her to ease her communication struggles. Among the other strategies she mentioned in her text were asking for repetition (Table 21, Extract 6.3), taking their communication struggles easy (Table 21, Extract 6.4) or teaching her boss some of her native language in exchange (Table 21, Extract 6.5).

Tab. 21: *Critical Incident 6 – Extracts 6.2–6.5*

Extract 6.2: *Bob is optimistic, and more friend than boss.*

Extract 6.3: *I always asked Bob to speak slowly and to pronounce words more clearly.*

Extract 6.4: *Even though we had communication problems, we laugh at it.*

Extract 6.5: *I also tried to teach him some Czech words to make our communication even funnier.*

In her final metacognitive remarks, the student elaborated on the possible reasons for her communication problems, surmising her inexperience in using English in an L1 environment was responsible for her struggles (Table 22, Extract 6.6). This realization led her to define what she believed to be a functional strategy, that is, learning English in a native speaking environment (Table 22, Extract 6.7). She, however, made further realizations related to language learning. For example, she seemed to become aware that making progress in foreign language acquisition

requires a willingness to accept a certain degree of discomfort (Table 22, Extract 6.8), or a reevaluation of the attitude to language precision (Table 22, Extract 6.9).

Tab. 22: *Critical Incident 6 – Extracts 6.6–6.9*

Extract 6.6: *I was not used to speak with native speakers. When I spoke English somewhere else than in school or at the University, I spoke mostly to Russian, Spanish, German or Asian people, whose English is also a little bit tricky like mine.*

Extract 6.7: *I have learned, that the best way how to learn speaking English is to go to England and speak with native speakers. Otherwise we learn just some kind of garbled English, which is a result of foreigners speaking between each other's.*

Extract 6.8: *Sometimes, I have to step out of my comfort zone and face out new challenges.*

Extract 6.9: *These seven months at Bentley completely changed my way of speaking English. I am not afraid to speak, even though I make still many mistakes.*

Based on the concluding remark, the student's communication difficulties at the new workplace in fact made her realize the difference between functional and formal language in practice. She learned the significance of people relationships, leadership approaches, or communication style over language precision.

4 Discussion and conclusions

The CI narratives presented in this paper, while varied in the critical incidents described, all attest to the learners' capacities to thoughtfully engage with key learning moments and draw from those moments insights to develop their own educational practice. They provided the learners with a lived educational experience upon which they broadened their awareness of acquiring language and communication skills. With regards to role models in language learning, the CI narratives, though small, reveal a diversity of experience. The pedagogical utility of the CIs, therefore, lies not in normative classification of an experience but rather in its ability to provide learners with a technique to reflect on, evaluate and build on their experience with a range of implications for modern language education.

To begin, the analyses above adopting the CIC model provided empirical evidence of the complexity of the teacher profession in language education. It was shown that, in order to reinforce the students' learning, teachers need to develop a professional set of skills reflecting upon the ideas of the humanistic methods introduced around the beginning of the new millenium (Richards and Rogers, 1991) which draw upon optimizing the learning atmosphere (suggestopedia), strengthening the bonds between and among learners and teachers (Community Language Learning) or developing learner autonomy and responsibility for one's own learn-

ing (The Silent Way). This means, teachers should receive adequate training not only in didactics or pedagogy, but also in disciplines related to human psyche, in order to be able to create a safe atmosphere in lessons, trustworthy and respectful teacher-student relationships, or apply an individual approach respecting varied personalities and study styles of the learners.

This leads the discussion to the management of formal language mistakes in language education and the role of student self-confidence in foreign language use. First, language teaching practice needs to seek a better balance between precision and efficiency in order to establish a more natural approach to language teaching (Krashen, 1994). This approach, in reverse, helps make realizations and regain their self-confidence in one's language competences. A functional rather than formal approach to teaching languages described in research on second language acquisition (e. g., Firth, 2009; Kurhila, 2005; Markee, 2000) and English as a lingua franca (e. g., Cogo, 2006; Jenkins, 2005; Pullin, 2015; Seidlhofer, 2005) accentuating the use of pragmatic language functions, therefore, seems to be more relevant when preparing students for everyday language use. One way to implement these principles into language education are the holistic concepts turning language from the center of instruction into a means of instruction. These concepts include the Content and Language Integrated Learning (Marsh, 1994; Morgado et al., 2015), Content-Based Instruction (Brinton et al., 1989), or Task-Based Learning (Ellis, 2003).

This study also shows the importance of learning a language beyond classrooms. Besides teachers, it is also advisors who can effectively boost the students' self-confidence and motivate for language learning while showing them the practical value of language knowledge and skills gained in school. Internships, therefore, are a concept that HEIs should incorporate into their programs. Experience gained from practical training can, at the same time, help reveal the students' learning needs. HEIs, as part of the student-centered approach, should take their students as partners and pursue needs analysis studies (Sieglová et al., 2017) when setting up their institutional strategies, defining the learning outcomes, developing their curricula and programs, and choosing methodologies and approaches to their teaching practices.

With learner autonomy in mind, the CIC model presented in this study stands as a potent didactic tool for making the learner a more engaged and active participant of the educational process. Personal narratives incorporating first-hand reactions and interpretations and followed by an extended re-evaluation of related decisions and actions reveals to language learners their linguistic behavior and patterns to be later implemented in the form of controlled and well-regulated linguistic (meta-)behavior into new communication situations. As shown in this research, these outcomes were achieved by students actively and critically assess-

ing situations of their own which can become a source of personalized, context-based learning and material for further language learning activities. CI narratives potentially place the individualization of language learning, acquisition and production in learners' hands. Therefore, they can significantly contribute to developing not only language and communication competences, but also professional growth, learner autonomy and motivation for life-long learning.

To conclude, CIs carry a great potential not only for science but also for practice, as they provide a corpus of material rooted in individual experience, and such individuality is crucial in language learning. For educators, the CIC model introduced in this study offers an approach that extends beyond cultivating learner autonomy as it extends learning outside the classroom and opens learners to the educational possibilities found in work and life. Moreover, the model offers a form of linguistic production that is connected to real life and has tangible, achievable results. It does not, however, have to be limited to language learning. As case studies, CIs can be used for training in areas such as business, travel industry, intercultural studies, or diversity management (e. g., Gaisch et al., 2021; Sieglóvá et al., 2023; Sieglóvá et al., 2022; Sieglóvá and Gaisch, 2023; Sieglóvá and Příbramská, 2021) and deepen engagement with a given field. Therefore, research and practice in the use of CIs needs further exploration to fully unveil their potential.

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