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CHAPTER 4

An experimental study of effects of intercultural communication training with critical incident open-ended tasks on the intercultural competence of English non-majors

Abstract

In this internationalized world, graduate employability in terms of intercultural communication skills needs to be taken into account in higher education. The present study aims to explore the effects of instructing cultural general knowledge in combination with critical incident open-ended task instruction on English non-majored undergraduates' intercultural competence. One group of students received ten weeks of instruction of cultural general knowledge with critical incident open-ended task and another group received regular English classes. Data were collected from the students' pre- and post-test. The results showed a significant and strong effect of the intervention with intercultural communication instruction with critical incident open-ended tasks on students' intercultural awareness. Implications for educational practice are presented for further teaching of intercultural communication with critical incident open-ended tasks.

4.1 Introduction

Nowadays, in the Mekong Delta and Ho Chi Minh city, the economy is thriving and lots of foreign companies are constructing their businesses in these areas. This means that in several organizations, Western employers and Vietnamese employees collaborate. In order to attain work productivity, these Western and Vietnamese professionals should communicate in an effective way. The Vietnamese professionals can be educated in effective communication and intercultural awareness during their school career. Intercultural awareness should be part of English classes for Vietnamese students, next to language acquisition. Nevertheless, in higher education, intercultural communication is neglected or taken into consideration at a low frequency level. There are many underlying rationales for the lack of culture incorporation and intercultural skills training in the English lessons such as grammar-translation method dominance, teachers' work load and shortage time for making up student-centered lessons and poor facilities. The growing demand to integrate intercultural learning and English language learning has challenged the conventional practice of teaching English in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2013). Accordingly, shifting from traditional teaching practice to an innovative teaching practice in order to develop students' intercultural capacity is one of the most important missions of English language education in Vietnam. The current research aims to develop insights in how future graduates' intercultural competence can be enhanced by intercultural communication training using critical incident open-ended tasks in English language education.

4.2 Theoretical background

4.2.1 Intercultural competence development in Vietnam

As socializing and communicating appropriately in a foreign language, specifically English, is a benefit for obtaining a job, it is crucial for language teachers to emphasize the role of culture instruction in the language classrooms. Both employers and educators believe that learners should be prepared for living in a multicultural world and become skillful negotiators in increasingly intercultural work situations (Lies, 2010; Tran, 2017; Webber, 2005). In the context of Vietnam, after the implementation of *Doi Moi* policy (1986), the economy has rapidly changed, which also has caused a big transformation of the labor market. Though "work-readiness" is gradually taken into consideration by most related stakeholders including employers, higher education institutions, students and their families, not much has been done to strengthen the connection between higher education institutions and enterprises to bring the students up to the speed of internationalism (Tran, 2012). The effort in preparing students with necessary skills and knowledge required by the contemporary labor market has not been successfully done due to the traditional teaching and learning methods in higher education institutions, the inadequate infrastructure, the lack of funding and the lack of connection among universities, research institutions and the internal industry (Tran, 2012). A study by Tran (2013) delving into what skills are the most essential for Vietnamese graduates to work effectively with employers showed that both employers and graduates perceive soft skills encompassing collaborative work skills, communication skills, independent working skills, presentation skills, social understanding and decision making skills as the most significant attributes employers are looking for.

Tran (2013) also emphasized that communication skills help students to enter the job market and maintain their success at work. Nguyen (2013) conducted a study to examine how culture, culture learning and intercultural competence development are integrated into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms in higher education in Vietnam. Two noticing findings came about. First, the subject of culture and culture learning is either rarely treated or treated in courses separated from the EFL program (Nguyen, 2013). Second, both teachers and students identified a number of constraints that limited their opportunities and motivation to engage in teaching and learning culture (Nguyen, 2013). Also, Nguyen, Harvey & Grant (2016) examined Vietnamese EFL teachers' belief about the role of culture in language teaching. The findings showed that the teachers mainly focused on the language knowledge and skills in their EFL classes and culture was subsequently a minor part of their teaching. The teachers reported some noticeable reasons for the lack of culture instructions in their lessons comprising of: students' low level of language proficiency, the demands of university examinations, time constraints versus heavy workload of language to be covered and teachers' perceptions of their own limited cultural knowledge (Nguyen, Harver & Grant, 2016).

While language and culture instruction are two inseparable domains, it is essential that culture should become a core and integrated element in language teaching in order to promote the development of language learners' intercultural competence (Nguyen, Harvey & Grant, 2016). Additionally, while intercultural competence needs the development of general cultural knowledge about one's own as well as other cultures (Perry & Southwell, 2011) and cognitive, affective and behavioral process, critical incident technique or critical incident tasks (CIT) had been demonstrated to provide learners with those attributes since Cushner (1989), Aoki (1992) and Tolbert & McLean (1995) contended that after being trained with critical incident technique, the participants were better able to act under ambiguous situations thanks to their knowledge about cultural concepts and problem-solving ability. Accordingly, in the current study, critical incident tasks were adopted to give training in combination with general intercultural knowledge instruction with the view to enhancing EFL students' intercultural competence.

4.2.2 Critical incident tasks

Critical incident tasks are communication situations which the participants (or one participant) consider as problematic and confusing. Typically, critical incidents consist of examples of situational clash events - situations where unexpected behavior occurs. Flanagan (1954, p. 327) defines the critical incident technique as… "a set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behavior in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles". The purpose of the critical incident technique is to develop one's ability to see interaction situations from perspectives of different cultures. Critical incidents might be quite an effective strategy to promote cross-cultural awareness because they highlight the differences and misunderstandings from a cultural perspective, and create chances for learners to think critically and analytically about these critical situations.

For ages, CIT has been used by many intercultural trainers (Aoki, 1992; Bochner & Coulon, 1997; Brislin, 1986; Cushner, 1989; Flanagan, 1954; Herfst, Oudenhoven & Timmerman, 2008; Lindy, Gail, Bob, Noel & Maureen, 2006; Milner, Ostmeier & Franke, 2013; Tolbert & McLean, 1995) in different forms and with different names, for instance, cultural assimilator, intercultural sensitizer activity, situational judgement test and encounter exercise. Basically, the mentioned critical incident techniques have three common characteristics. The first characteristic implies that critical incident tasks are all hypothetical situations or vignettes "involving two or more well-meaning

characters from different cultures which results in some kind of misunderstanding, puzzlement, or problem" (Snow, 2015, p. 287). The second shared element is that critical incident tasks contain one or more questions asking the learners to consider the cause of the problem or misunderstanding (Snow, 2015). Lastly, if the goal of training is to change behaviors or attitudes, other approaches are more applicable than the critical incident exercises; the purpose of critical incident technique is to raise learners' awareness only (Collins & Pieterse, 2007; Hiller, 2010; Tolbert & McLean, 1995).

CIT was initially developed by Flanagan (1954). In this study, he collected 1000 pilot candidates' reports about the specific reasons for failure in learning to fly. The study proved its usefulness for better procedures for obtaining a representative sample of factual incidents regarding pilot performance. From this study, Flanagan concluded that the findings would underpin practical problem-solving in areas such as employee performance enhancement and scientific behavioral analysis. Thanks to Flanagan's study's success, the use of CIT flourished in multiple disciplines comprising of aviation program, medical and health care training, employee and expatriate training, intercultural competence development program, etc.

Cushner (1989) utilized CIT - the author called the technique the culture-general assimilator – to teach 28 adolescent international exchange students representing 14 countries and hosted by Intercultural Program New Zealand for a period of one year after their arrival in the host country. The control group of 22 students received traditional Intercultural Program New Zealand orientation. The results indicated that students who were taught with CIT were better able to identify dynamics which mediate cross-cultural interaction and adjustment, compared to the other students. This can be specified in the following indications: *(1)* students in the experimental group demonstrated greater ability to generate and analyze misunderstanding in a personal incident, *(2)* they had greater control of their environment, and *(3)* regarding problem-solving abilities, they had a strong tendency to approach situations with more cultural-knowledge and to take more of an initiative in their problem situations. From the findings, the author concluded that the culture-general assimilator can become an initiator to introduce important cultural concepts via hypothesized scripted manner, thus, can help students to be able to communicate effectively with people from other cultures as they now might relate a body of knowledge, concepts, and vocabulary to their conversational situations.

Similar results were found in seven other studies conducted by Mitchell & Foa (1969), Chemers (1969), Worchel & Mitchell (1970), O'Brien, Fiedler & Hewett (1971), Aoki (1992), Herfst, Oudenhoven & Timmerman (2008) and Nakagawa (2014). Congruent with Cushner' findings, the participants in those studies also obtained isomorphic attributions. Isomorphic attributions mean that people from different cultures formulate analogous interpretations to given behaviors. These attributions indicate individuals' ability to communicate effectively in intercultural context, have greater control of their environment and be active and initiative in problem-solving situations.

Albert (1986) emphasized one possible defect of critical incident technique which implied that learners might not attain the importance of social factors and contexts through a simple critical episode; thus, it may be crucial to make these factors explicit as not all learners are sufficiently intuitive to grasp the points in the incident and its explanations. For example, an incident narrates a long conversation between a Chinese employee with his Western mentor or manager about the Chinese employee's hesitance to raise his voice or participate in the company's meeting. Throughout the conversation, a lot of argumentative statements between these two characters are presented. If the students were not informed before about the cultural and social factors such as the Chinese employee's face saving manner in public places and the participative leadership style of Western companies' culture, they would not be able to understand why the characters in the scenario do this and say that.

Because of this, Albert (1986) noted that CIT should be incorporated with other approaches in order to maximize the effectiveness of learning.

In these studies, CIT can be classified into two major categories: *tasks with close-ended questions* (cultural assimilator, intercultural sensitizer activity and situational judgement test) and *tasks with open-ended questions* (encounter exercise). *Tasks with close-ended questions* are constructed from a hypothetical scenario with multiple choice exercises, including a list of possible explanations for the situation and an answer key that discusses the merits of each possible explanation (Richard, Leah, Brigitte, Joseph & Ou, 2016; Snow, 2015). *Tasks with open-ended questions* requires learners to generate possible explanations of the situation for themselves. The open-ended format requires more of students' engagement in the discussion to work out the answers than the close-ended ones do, and might therefore better suited to be incorporated in English as Foreign Language classes (Snow, 2015). Open ended tasks also provide good speaking and expository writing practice.

In the current study, we decided to adopt CIT in combination with general intercultural knowledge instruction to enhance the English non-majors' intercultural competence. We decided to choose the critical incident open-ended task instead of the close-ended one. In order to achieve the goal, we aimed to answer the following research question:

Do intercultural communication instruction by means ofcritical incident open-ended tasks enhance English non-majored undergraduates' awareness of intercultural communication?

4.3   Method

4.3.1   Design

A pretest-posttest control group design was used to examine the effects of intercultural communication instruction with critical incident tasks on students' awareness of intercultural communication. Both the intervention group and the control group were instructed with the same instructional course designed for English non-majors with their majors in the technical domain. The course textbook was adapted from the English course book named "Outcomes Intermediate: Real English for the Real World, 1st Edition" by Hugh Dellar & Andrew Walkley (2011). The intervention was the implementation of intercultural communication instruction with ten critical incident tasks (ten workplace scenarios) (see Appendix 3) added to the course instruction. Students in the experimental condition and control condition completed the pre- and post-test (Table 4.1).

Table 4.1
Research Design

Group	Pre-test	Intervention	Post-test
EC (n=234)	O_1 (W1)	IC & CI	O_2 (W11)
CC (n=88)	O_1 (W1)	R	O_2 (W11)

Note: EC = Experimental condition; CC = Control condition; IC & CI = Intercultural Communication Instruction with Critical Incident Tasks; R = Regular course teaching; W1 = Week 1; W11 = Week 11 (the students had 10 weeks for the course); O = measurement of learners' intercultural awareness; O_1 = Pretest; O_2 = Posttest

4.3.2 Participants

Participants were 322 second-year English non-majors in 6 classes of Technical Engineering (131 females). The participants were of the same age of 19 years old. The students' classes were randomly divided into experimental (4 groups with 234 students) or control (2 groups with 88 students) condition. All students were required to take an entrance university examination and an English placement test in their first year. Moreover, they followed two courses of General English for English non-majors in their first year and they all passed the final tests of those courses. All the participants were from the Mekong Delta regions in Vietnam.

4.3.3 Procedures

The course took place in 10 weeks with 2 meetings of 4 hours each week. For the treatment condition, students received intercultural communication instruction with one critical incident task of 1 and a half hour in one meeting per week. The other meeting of 2 and a half hour was used for regular education or textbook instruction and students' practice of 4 English skills for TOEIC test. In the control condition (CC), the students only received the regular course instruction with the textbook and practice of 4 English skills for TOEIC test of 4 hours each week. The students in the control group received more English-skill assignments than the experimental group. In Table 4.2, we summarize the setup of the procedures of the treatment condition.

Table 4.2
Course Procedures for the Treatment Condition

	Lessons	Procedures
IC (Intercultural Communication Instruction) & CIT lessons	1 3 5	Initiating activity + introduction of the critical incident task + discussion of the critical incident task in pairs + performing the critical incident task individually + wrap-up
	7 9 11 13 15 17 19	Initiating activity + discussion of the critical incident task in pairs + performing the critical incident task individually + wrap-up
Regular lessons	2 4 6 8 10 12 14 16 18 20	Regular textbook tasks + students' practice of 4 English skills for TOEIC test

Of the four experimental groups, two were instructed by one instructor, who is one of the authors and has been engaging in teaching English as a foreign language for 7 years. The other two groups were instructed by the other instructor, who is also an English teacher and has had experiences in teaching English as a foreign language for ten years. The two student groups in the control condition were instructed by two other teachers, one teacher for each group. These two instructors are also English teachers. The first one has been involved in instructing English as a foreign language for 15 years and the other for 8 years.

Treatment condition
Students in the experimental condition were given a critical incident task treatment. In the first three weeks, lessons were built up with five parts: 1) an initiating activity, 2) introduction of the critical

incident task, 3) discussion of the critical incident task in pairs, 4) performing the critical incident task individually and 5) wrap-up.

- In the initiating activity, cultural differences between Western and Eastern culture in the workplace were introduced through supplementary cultural materials including the cultural notes in the form of texts or pictures or cultural video clips. The purpose of this initiating activity was to help the learners grasp the major cultural points that would emerge in the critical incident task afterwards.

- Then, the critical incident task was introduced and explained. In the first three lessons, a model or instructions of the task was provided so that the students could master the aims and significant points in performing the task.

- Next, the students discussed the incidents in pairs. In all tasks, the students were asked to summarize the scenario of the incidents and work out the problematic issues of those incidents in the perspective of effective intercultural communication. We let the students discuss the incidents in pairs as we aimed to facilitate effective social skills among the students which is a stimulus for their awareness of intercultural communication (Marjan & Seyed, 2012; Rebecca, 1997; Theodore, 1999). Additionally, considering the fact that the complicated structure of the critical incident tasks and their follow-up questions require critical and higher-order thinking skills from learners to arrive at an appropriate answer, the function of working out the problems in pairs can ease the process of figuring out the answer.

- In the following step, the students were requested to perform their answer individually on an answer sheet since we aimed to gain the students' final product in their own perception which means that we expected to see how they extracted the information they obtained from their peer discussion and demonstrated this knowledge in their own perspective. We decided to give freedom to the learners' choice of language for answering the questions since we considered that their limited level of English competence, which is elementary, might hold them back from giving the best response to the task.Finally, there was a wrap-up phase in which teachers summarized and asked questions about what the learners had just studied. In this phase, the instructor also explained the answer and gave feedback to the students for the task they have just done.

In the last seven weeks, lessons had only four parts leaving out the introduction of the task as students were accustomed to the task.

Twelve critical incident tasks (including the pretest and posttest) from several Intercultural Booklets (see Appendix 4) designed as training guides for Intercultural Education Program were utilized for the intervention program. There was one task (task 8) written by the first author on the basis of a real story in a foreign subsidiary in Vietnam. These tasks were selected because of three reasons. First, these critical incident themes are congruent with the cultural issues coming about from earlier studies, which are the main authentic concerns of professionals currently working in foreign subsidiaries and joint-ventures in Vietnam. Second, these incidents were purposely designed for undergraduate students taking their first course in intercultural communication (James, 2015) and for professional training of the multicultural corporations in an effort to improve their workers' relations, equalize opportunities and enhance workplace experiences for their increasingly multicultural labor force (Norquest College, 2015). The intended trainees of these critical incidents are consistent with the participants of this study as we aimed to train the undergraduate students, who took their first course in intercultural communication and are supposed to work with foreign professionals after their graduation. Finally, these critical incidents demonstrate an in-depth look into two contrasting cultural

ideologies, Eastern and Western culture. They have the consistency in the characters in which one party consists of Asian professionals, possessing an Eastern view whereas the other party includes Western professionals, owning a Western vision. The two distinctive characters entirely fit in our goal of making comparison of these cultural system, awakening learners' awareness of the dissimilarities and touching their curiosity, openness and empathy for the Western culture.

Control condition

The two student groups in the control condition were instructed by two other teachers, one teacher for each group. These two instructors are also English teachers. The first one has been involved in instructing English as a foreign language for 15 years and the other for 8 years.

In the control condition (CC), the students only received the regular course instruction with the textbook of four hours each week. The students in the control group received more English-skill assignments than the experimental group.

4.3.4   Data collection

The pretest and posttest were structured in the same format as the ten critical incident tasks of the intervention. Participants completed the pretest at the beginning of the course and the posttest one week after the final critical incident task of the experimental condition.

Data were gathered via students' answer sheets. In the answer sheet, respectively, there is an instruction for the students to do the task, the critical incident which is a problematic workplace scenario in the form of texts or conversations among characters and a table with four questions. The students were asked to read the scenario in five minutes and then discuss the scenario and work out the solutions to the problem in pairs in twenty minutes. Afterwards, they wrote down their answers to the four questions in the table individually. The four questions were formulated in line with three indicators: (1) *students' understanding of the scenario (scenario understanding – question 1)*; (2) *students' understanding of the miscommunicated points in the scenario (miscommunication understanding – question 2)*; (3) *students' awareness of effective communication in Western or Eastern culture (awareness communication Western or Eastern – question 3 and 4)* and constructed in an ascending level of difficulty in which the students uncovered the issue from a basic analytical ground to a higher critical thinking arena (the pre-test and post-test are included in Appendix 3).

The students' answers were rated with a rubric, based on the Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Value Rubric for grading (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2013), the model of Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett, 1993) and Deardorff's intercultural framework (Deardorff, 2006). We decided to integrate this rubric to our grading criteria because this rubric offers a "systematic" way to measure learners' capacity to determine their own "cultural patterns", make a comparison with others and "adapt empathetically and flexibly to unfamiliar ways of being" (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2013).

Students' answers in the pre-test and post-test were rated in 10 point grading scale with 5 levels (see Appendix 5). For each of the four questions, 2.5 points could be earned, in which level 1 (0.5 point) is the lowest and level 5 (2.5 points) is the highest.

The students' answers were graded by the first instructor of the experimental group, one of the authors of this article. In order to ensure the reliability of the grading procedure, the two instructors of the experimental groups rated the posttest of one experimental group (N=56) with a satisfactory correlation (r = 0.692).
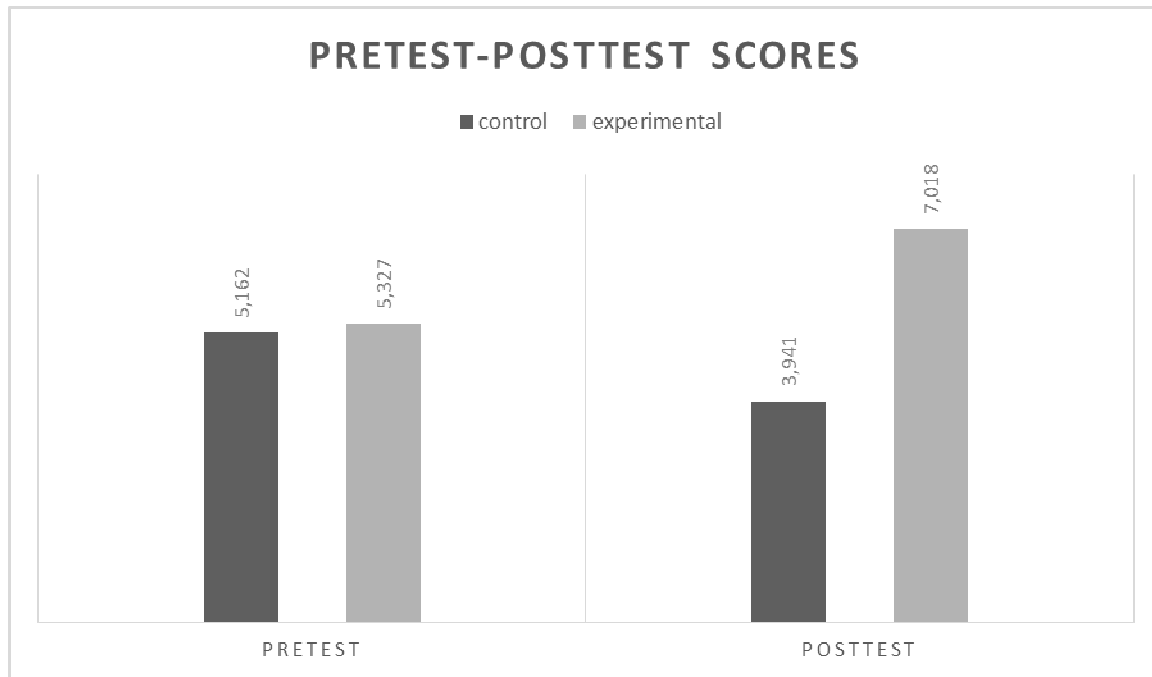
4.3.5   Data analysis

Students were grouped in classes and instructors. Six groups of students participated with four groups of students in the experimental conditions and two groups in the control condition. The four groups of students of the experimental condition were instructed by two teachers, each of them teaching two groups. To check whether the variance of the pre-test and post-test scores that can be attributed to the group level variance component models with two levels (group and student) were analyzed for the pre-test and posttest scores, both the total score and the scores on the three indicators. In all analyses, variance at the group level did not differ significantly from 0 showing low proportions of variance explained at the group level. Therefore, we performed multivariate analysis of covariance at the student level with condition (intercultural communication instruction with critical incident task or regular education) as factor, the post-test scores on the three indicators of awareness of intercultural communication as dependent variables and the pre-test scores as covariates. Subsequently, we performed paired-samples t-test for each indicator between pre-test and post-test scores within each condition.

To examine a potential instructor effect, we also tested differences in change of pre-test scores to post-test scores between the two teachers within each condition with repeated measures analyses of variance. In both the experimental condition and control condition, we did not find any difference between the teachers in change of the pre-test scores to the post-test scores: experimental condition ($F(1,166(= 0.780); p= 0.379$) and control condition: ($F(1,66(= 1.488); p= 0.227$). We had similar results for the change in each indicator.

4.4   Results

In Table 4.3, we present the descriptive statistics for both conditions. We found a multivariate effect for condition (Wilks' $\lambda = .452$; df $= 3,228$; $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .548$), which showed a significant difference between both conditions on the posttest scores on students' awareness of intercultural communication. Students from the experimental condition generally showed significant higher scores on the posttest on awareness of intercultural communication than the students from the control condition, after controlling for the pre-test scores (see Figure 4.1).

The test of between-subjects effects with three indicators as dependent variables showed a significant difference of three indicators in the posttest's results between the experimental and control condition, after controlling for the pre-test scores. The largest difference was found in *awareness communication Western or Eastern* (indicator 3) ($F(1, 234) = 141.324$; $p = <.001$; $\eta2 = 0.503$). A smaller but still significant effect was found in *scenario understanding* (indicator 1) ($F(1,234)$; p .001; $\eta^2 =0.217$) and *miscommunication understanding* (indicator 2) ($F(1,234)= 53.774$; $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = 0.356$).

Figure 4.1 *Pre and Posttest scores of the Experimental and Control Groups*

Table 4.3

Means and Standard Deviations of Pretest and Posttest

Indicators	Experimental				Control			
	Pre-test		Posttest		Pre-test		Posttest	
	Mean (SD)	N	Mean (SD)	N	Mean (SD)	N	Mean (SD)	N
Scenario understanding (Indicator 1)	1.638 (0.522)	185	1.826 (0.417)	167	1.607 (0.411)	84	1.272 (0.629)	68
Miscommunication understanding (Indicator 2)	1.168 (0.619)	184	1.695 (0.517)	167	1.119 (0.5)	84	0.897 (0.419)	68
Awareness communication Western or Eastern (Indicator 3)	2.505 (1.08)	185	3.509 (0.842)	167	2.446 (0.832)	84	1.772 (0.637)	68
Total	5.327 (1.671)	168	7.018 (1.339)	168	5.162 (1.288)	68	3.941 (1.256)	68

Next, we performed paired samples t-test between the pre-test and post-test scores for each condition. For the experimental condition, all differences between pre- and post-scores were significantly different with higher scores on the post-test with p $\leq$0.001 (indicator 1: t(167)= -4.026; indicator 2: t(167)= -9.665; indicator 3: t(167)= -10.329; total pre-test: t(167)= -11.590). For the control condition, all differences between pre- and post-test scores were significantly different with lower scores on the

post-test (indicator 1: t(67)= 4.366; p≤0.001; indicator 2: t(67)= 2.558; p=0.013; indicator 3: t(67)= 4.658; p≤0.001; total pre-test: t(67)= 6.022; p≤0.001).

4.5   Discussion

Students following the intercultural communication instruction by means of critical incident task procedure showed a stronger development of their awareness of intercultural communication compared to the students in the control condition. Accordingly, we conclude that intercultural communication intervention through teaching critical incident open-ended tasks with student pair work generally enhances students' intercultural competence in terms of awareness of intercultural communication.

We found significant differences of answers on critical incident open-ended tasks on students' awareness of intercultural communication between the experimental and control group among the three indicators: (1) *understanding of the scenario*, (2) *understanding of the miscommunicated points in the scenario*, and (3) *awareness of effective communication in Western or Eastern culture*. The differences were stronger for indicator 3 than indicator 1 and 2. Those results are predictable since the three indicators representing four questions were designed in an ascending level of difficulty, in which number 1 is the easiest, number 2 in the middle and 3 and 4 are the most difficult ones. We can apparently see that the trained students and untrained ones have differences in a logical development of intercultural competence. Their development goes from *curiosity and discovery* (scenario understanding), next *observation, analysis, evaluation and interpretation* (miscommunication understanding), then *adaptability, flexibility and empathy* to finally, *effective and appropriate communication* (awareness communication Western or Eastern). Students in the experimental condition were found to be able to use the knowledge they gained from training to explain and give suggestions to cross-cultural misunderstanding compared to students from the control condition. Replicating other studies' results (Aoki, 1992; Cushner, 1989; Flanagan, 1954; Nagakawa, 2014; Lindy, Gail, Bob, Noel & Maureen, 2006, etc.), the findings highlight the effects of the intercultural communication treatment and critical incident technique is a desirable tool for cross-cultural training in EFL classes, particularly introduction to important cultural concepts that direct further cross-cultural training.

4.6   Implications

Intercultural communication instruction by means of critical incident open-ended tasks is promising for providing cross-cultural teaching as part of EFL classrooms. We also postulated the following implications. First, teaching cultural general knowledge might not be enough for the learners' preparation to emerge in an intercultural context (Tolbert & Mclean, 1995). The learners need essential skills to succeed in their professional environment and intercultural communication instruction through using the critical incident approach might bring them up with those necessary skills in order to gain control of the international workplace settings. Besides, although the main goal of the current study is to enhance future graduates' intercultural awareness, we believe that intercultural communication instruction with critical incident technique is also useful for future expatriate managers training because in an intercultural context, awareness of intercultural communication from both parties is needed. Second, critical incident tasks might be effective when it is combined with other ways of teaching. In our study, the instructors did perform the initiating task in which the major cultural points that would emerge in the critical incident task were presented through

texts, pictures or video clips. Third, in order to optimize the training, we conceived that pair work or group work could be a good option. Learners collaborated and argued a lot to figure out what was happening in the scenario and even for the explications and resolutions to the problems. Fourth, due to time limitation and the workload of combining the course book and the intervention of intercultural communication with critical incident tasks, some of the extra English language assignments were eliminated in the experimental group. We suggest that in future study, more time is needed for the course so that the instructors are not in pressure of time to finish two tasks simultaneously and the learners also have more rooms to fully develop both language and intercultural competence. Finally, we also suggest that CIT might be effective when a series of tasks are applied, which means that practice of the tasks should happen regularly so that the students get accustomed to the structure of the task.

4.7 Limitations

The students in the experimental condition received both intercultural communication instruction and communication skills in their speaking lessons of regular education. Because of this, the results might be affected by two conditions: intercultural communication skills and general communication skills. In further research, we suggest that students' development in regular education should also be taken into account.

Two instructors of the experimental groups found out that the students were a little bored when they did the same task with the same format every week. Some students were really motivated until the end of the course but some others lost their interests when they did the same task every week. Therefore, we suggest that in the following research, critical incident tasks should also be instructed every week; nevertheless, role play or other forms of cross-cultural training can be incorporated in order to help students gain real performance experience from the skills they obtain from the critical incidents or critical incident tasks should be alternated with other teaching formats.

In the current study, intercultural communication was instructed by means of critical incident open-ended tasks to promote English non-majors' awareness of intercultural communication. The study is a quasi-experimental study with two conditions: experimental and control. The experimental group received teaching intercultural communication with critical incident tasks and the control group received regular education in which the students were instructed with normal course for English non-majors. Although teaching of communication skills was included in the control condition, it cannot be concluded that the development of the students in the experimental group of their intercultural awareness is affected by relatively more attention to intercultural communication (as addition to communication skills in general), the critical incident tasks as a teaching method, or both of them. Although giving lectures to compare two or more cultures that should be appear in the critical incident tasks is a compulsory step in the intervention (Shibata, 1998), this is still a limitation of this study. In further studies, a better design in which the experimental group receive both intercultural lectures and critical incident open-ended tasks and the control group receive only intercultural lectures should be made. Only in this case, more accurate interpretations of the effects of critical incident open-ended could be obtained.

4.8 Conclusions

Integrating culture instruction into the language lessons as a preparation for students' intercultural encounters should be a main concern in higher education. To carry out this mission, intercultural

communication instruction by means of critical incident tasks could provide a basic foundation which can serve many needs and from which further cross-cultural learning may develop. We hope that the successful implementation of this intercultural course with critical incident tasks will give and boost to the growing trend of intercultural competence teaching in the region.