



Critical Incidents and Apologies Across Cultures

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This article describes a college EFL teaching unit aimed at helping Japanese students understand how cultural factors impact apologies. The unit features a lecture, discussion and the use of critical incidents, such as the 2001 Ehime Maru accident.

The Ehime Maru Incident

On February 9th, 2001, a U.S. Navy submarine surfaced near Hawaii and accidentally hit the *Ehime Maru*, a Japanese high school training ship. Nine Japanese crew, including several students, died. The accident became an international incident, with the bereaved Japanese families expecting a form of apology that was not immediately forthcoming from the American side. The issue was complicated by frenzied media attention in both Japan and the U.S. which attempted to portray the accident in light of the American military presence in Okinawa and of Japanese national apologies in the context of Japan's imperialistic history.

After the *Ehime Maru* accident, the U.S. was slow to apologize. Public statements offered such phrases as "sincere regret" if the U.S. Navy was found to be at fault. At stake on the American side was a tense political relationship, legal issues and the matter of compensation. Finally, an American envoy was sent to Japan with an official apology from the U.S. President delivered at the diplomatic level and to the bereaved families. This was well-received but failed to appease the families as it did not come directly from the submarine captain.

During this period, the captain maintained a silence that increasingly infuriated the families of the victims. His non-apology is best explained in light of the Navy investigation and potential legal liability. Finally, he expressed his "sincere regret" in letters to the families delivered to the Japanese consulate in Hawaii. This gesture was rejected outright by the victims, who deemed it insufficient.

It quickly became clear that the type of apology the Japanese public wanted from the captain was unlikely to be offered any time soon. The families repeatedly requested a clear, public expression of contrition given directly to the victims which acknowledged responsibility and showed that he was aware of their grief. The Japanese maintained the apology must have a human face. Many demanded that he bow before them, as is ritual in Japan. His reluctance to make any public remarks or apologize directly was viewed as offensive and as a failure to abide by Japanese cultural norms.

Critical Cultural Incidents

Teachers working in contexts where such intercultural communication crises might occur need to be prepared to deal with incidents like this and with the questions that are sure to arise in the classroom. Such incidents provide an opportunity to show students how culture impacts on language and behaviour, and to show how to overcome, or preferably prevent, the cultural resentment that can appear in failed intercultural communication. Culture clearly featured strongly in the *Ehime Maru* case. As such, it provides a real life example of a 'critical incident' that can be used to help students understand intercultural communication as well as cultural influences on language.

Critical incidents are defined in Chen and Starosta (1998) as case studies based on real-life experiences with people from other cultures which "depict a controversy or a conflict that reflects cultural values or other aspects of a culture" (p. 272). Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) have shown how critical incidents can be used as teaching materials for increasing cultural awareness and sensitivity. Brislin (2002) recommends critical incidents as an approach whereby students can analyze cases "that depict people in intercultural encounters that involve a misunderstanding or a difficulty" and that introduce students to "research concepts that assist in understanding intercultural interactions they are likely to have in future".

A Contrastive Analysis Approach

A good method for teaching about apologies is the contrastive analysis of cultural norms. This considers factors in both cultures that can impact on how an apology is given or received. The *Ehime Maru* case helps learners to "understand that different evaluations of appropriateness may exist across cultures" (Meier, 1997, pp. 24-25).

Contrastive analysis, however, has potential "traps" including oversimplification, polarization and cultural reductivism (Guest, 2002, pp.154-155). There is also the possibility that emotionally charged incidents, such as the *Ehime Maru* case, might reinforce stereotypes and generalizations. Contrastive analysis, then, should involve sensitivity, acknowledgement of exceptions, and avoidance of "otherization". Close analysis of a critical incident can help learners attain a level of intercultural sensitivity close to the initial phase of Bennett's (1998) ethnorelative stages.

A College EFL Unit on Culture and Apologies

(a) Mini-lecture: After explaining terms (*apology, ethnocentric, norms...*), I give a lecture contrasting American and Japanese apologies. Samovar (2000), for example, explains how apologies at the beginning of a speech, though appropriate in Japan, can serve to "reduce one's credibility" in the U.S.(p.305). This can be a PowerPoint, a listening or a note-taking task. Students can also be asked to share experiences of apologizing across cultures.

(b) Critical Incidents: The next stage involves critical incidents about aspects of Japanese culture to familiarize students with intercultural analysis and show how culture impacts apologies. Students can discuss these in groups and report to the class.

(c) News Items: Students can study and discuss Japanese TV news clips of company presidents apologizing for defective products or university presidents apologizing for entrance exam mistakes or for sexual harassment by faculty members.

If one aim of teaching is to help students improve their pragmatic abilities in English, then cross-cultural studies of apologies are of great value.

Critical Incident #1: Traffic Accident

(Based on Kataoka *Japanese Cultural Encounters*, p. 2)

Tom was driving in Japan, when a child suddenly ran into the street. He quickly braked, but his car hit the child. Tom immediately called the police. Luckily, the child's injuries were minor and witnesses explained that Tom was not at fault. He felt sorry for the child but decided there was nothing he could do. After several days, Tom heard from the police that the child's parents were upset about his response to the incident. Why?

Explanation: In Japan, you are expected to apologize and visit the victim of an accident, even if you are not at fault, to show your sincerity.

Critical Incident #2: Business Presentation

(From *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*)

Harumi was working for a U.S. firm. He agreed to present a business plan on Friday. On Tuesday, the company computers crashed and his assistant called in sick. When Harumi began his Friday talk, he said, "I'm sorry I'm not well prepared. This may not be a good use of your time." He then gave a good presentation. After, an American asked, "Why did you apologize? Everyone knows about the computer crash and your assistant's illness."

Explanation: In Japan, apologies show concern for bother caused to people. In the US, they can be associated with weakness or an admission of guilt.

Critical Incident #3: Two Airplane Crashes

(Adapted from Barnlund and Yoshioka, 1990)

In 1982, two fatal plane crashes occurred. One was in Washington, D.C., killing 77 people. The other happened in Tokyo with 24 dead. In the U.S. crash, the crew, the airline officials and the government made no effort to apologize to the public or the victims' families. To explain the accident, officials cited poor safety records at the airport and said the accident was to be expected. The Tokyo crash was handled very differently. Can you suggest how?

Answer:

1. The president of the airline company apologized to the public, visited every family to apologize personally and handed in his resignation.
2. The captain and co-pilot officially apologized for the accident even before it could be determined whether the cause of the crash was pilot error.
3. The Director of Transportation resigned his position to take responsibility for the accident.

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