Critical Incidents in Pedagogy: an avenue to develop key competences

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Abstract

Current societal trends foreshadowing Industry 4.0 will no doubt influence the world of education and language teaching. Adequate approaches to balance the changing means of communication and the world of work must be sought to meet the educational needs of students and prepare them to succeed in their jobs and lives. While language teaching methodologies and approaches develop over time, the know-how collected in nearly two centuries needs to be integrated into language teaching and learning practice to fit modern educational standards. Critical incidents, i. e., vivid life events, meet the requirements for context-integrated, student-centered, self-motivational teaching aimed at learner autonomy and life-long learning.

This article is based on a joint research conducted under an international Erasmus+ project entitled 'Critical Incidents in Intercultural Communication and Promoting Diversity' that runs in partnership with five higher education institutions (HEIs) from Germany, Austria, Italy, and Finland under the coordination of the SKODA AUTO University (SAU) from Czechia. Two sample CIs happening to tertiary students during their social encounters in school and internship settings were chosen to elicit a wide range of possible interpretations from 34 respondents, at least 6 from each partner research team, allowing for a profound and differentiated picture of potential socio-cultural variation of answers, including implications for pedagogy. Data collected from the interviews with 10 Czech students, five male and five female, were subjected to a more detailed scrutiny for this study, to identify country specific educational outcomes and implications for language learning.

Key words: language education, teaching methodologies, 21st century skills, critical incidents, critical incident cycle

Kritické události v pedagogice: cesta k rozvoji klíčových kompetencí

Abstrakt

Současné společenské trendy předznamenávající Průmysl 4.0 nepochybně ovlivní i svět vzdělávání a výuky jazyků. Je třeba hledat adekvátní přístupy, které by vyvážily měnící se způsoby komunikace a svět práce, aby byly naplněny vzdělávací potřeby studentů a připravily je na úspěch v zaměstnání a v životě. Zatímco metodiky a přístupy k výuce jazyků se v průběhu času vyvíjejí, je třeba do praxe výuky a učení jazyků začlenit know-how nashromážděné za téměř dvě století, aby odpovídalo moderním vzdělávacím standardům. Kritické události, tj. živé životní události, splňují požadavky na kontextově integrovanou, na studenta zaměřenou, sebemotivační výuku zaměřenou na autonomii studenta a celoživotní učení.

Tento článek vychází ze společného výzkumu realizovaného v rámci mezinárodního projektu Erasmus+ s názvem „Kritické incidenty v mezikulturní komunikaci a podpora rozmanitosti", který probíhá v partnerství s pěti vysokoškolskými institucemi (VŠ) z Německa, Rakouska, Itálie a Finska pod koordinací ŠKODA AUTO University (SAU) z České republiky. Byly vybrány dva vzorky CI, které se dějí studentům terciárního vzdělávání během jejich sociálních setkání ve školním prostředí a na stážích, aby se získala široká škála možných interpretací od 34 respondentů, nejméně 6 z každého partnerského výzkumného týmu, což umožnilo získat hluboký a diferencovaný obraz potenciální sociokulturní variability odpovědí, včetně důsledků pro pedagogiku. Data získaná z rozhovorů s 10 českými studenty, pěti muži a pěti ženami, byla pro účely této studie podrobena podrobnějšímu zkoumání, aby bylo možné identifikovat vzdělávací výsledky specifické pro danou zemi a implikace pro výuku jazyků.

Klíčová slova: jazykové vzdělávání, metodiky výuky, dovednosti 21. století, kritické incidenty, cyklus kritických incidentů.

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Introduction

Technological development in the 21st century requires 21st century skills. Aiming at Industry 4.0 job market epitomized by digitalization, automation, and virtual reality, these trends will inevitably influence the way how people communicate. Assumptions exist that gadgets and applications will take over communication functions in foreign languages. As a result, newly formed national educational strategies in some European countries started disputing the 1 + 2 strategy (Council of the EU 2014: 1), including Czechia (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, Czech Republic, 2022), in a belief that learning foreign languages, excluding English as a lingua franca, will no longer be necessary in the future. This argument, however, is amiss.

The onset of artificial intelligence elevates rather than lowers the importance of communication since employees must not only master foreign languages but cultivate a wider set of other intra- as well as interpersonal skills and competencies. Therefore, foreign language instruction must extend beyond mere linguistic competence to foster these desirable skills.

1 Language education 21st century challenges

Many countries, however, still lag behind in the ability to ensure strong foreign language skills and, more importantly, effective use of the target language in real-world contexts. For example, only 11.07% of Czechs assess their English skills as good or very good, compared to 50% in Estonia, or 90% in The Netherlands. Even though 32% of the Czechs are aware of the benefits of foreign languages, 35% of these people plan to seek a job abroad, and 27% use them actively during travel (European Parliament, 2022; European Union, 2012). A solution to this problem is not reducing teaching foreign languages in a belief it would improve general English language skills, as the problem dwells not in the abilities to learn languages but the way how teaching foreign languages is organized and how they are taught. This study, therefore, explores ways to contribute to the enhancement of language teaching methodologies. Critical incidents (CI), i. e., vivid individual's life events, will be introduced as one of the possible multifaceted tools for modern language teaching in the context of the current trends.

1.1 The development of language education

Language education dates back to the middle of the 19th century. Richards and Rogers (2001) point to three basic directions in its early development. The grammar-translation method was the first recorded approach. Based on translating texts from and

into a mother and target language, it emphasized grammatical precision, reading, and writing skills. This narrow focus soon opened space for the audio-lingual method accentuating listening and speaking in the target language, typically through intensified question-answer drills, dictation, or reading aloud. The direct method, finally, adopted a more natural contact with the target language and set base to the so-called inductive approach to teaching grammar.

With the arrival of the communicative approach (Brumfit, 1992; Hymes, 1991; Littlewood, 1994; Widdowson, 1978) in the late seventies, language education shifted focus to a functional rather than formal approach developing the ability to properly use languages in concrete social situations. In addition, the approach to mistakes was modified to reach the optimal balance between accuracy and fluency.

Another milestone in the language acquisition research was made by Stephen Krashen (Krashen, 1994; Krashen & Terrell, 1983) in the eighties who, noting similarities in how children and adults learn languages, proposed a natural approach to languages teaching. According to his "Monitor Model", learners need to build a "comprehensible input", mainly during the so-called "silent period", allowing them individual time to build a linguistic foundation. His concept known as "input + 1" (i + 1) set to find a balance between challenging but still intelligible receptive activities and adequate demands of productive practice. His findings further de-emphasized adherence to error-correction in the classroom for the sake of safe learning atmosphere.

The oncoming new millennium brought further new perspectives. Besides Michael Lewis' (1993) lexical approach accentuating vocabulary building over grammar and Vladimir Nepustil's (1994) authorized method accelerating adoption of basic language structures, the humanistic methods (in Richards & Rogers, 1991) aimed at minimizing learner stress (Total Physical Response method), optimizing classroom atmosphere (suggestopedia), promoting bonds among learners (Community Language Learning), or developing learner autonomy (The Silent Way). Optimizing teacher and student talking time (Chaudron, 1988), finally, redefined the teacher-student relationships and maximized students' active participation in their own learning.

Language teaching concepts from the end of the century, finally, adopted a holistic approach based on cooperation between language and professions. From being the center of instruction, languages turned into a means of instruction in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) (Marsh, 1994; Morgado et al., 2015), Content-Based Instruction (CBI) (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989), or the Task-Based Approach (TBI) (Ellis, 2003). These approaches, increasingly popular in HEIs, build language skills on immersion into the context of a particular subject or through tasks requiring interdisciplinary solutions. These new concepts incorporate the key findings from the aforementioned approaches. They represent a natural approach to teaching languages, intensify the contact with the target language, assume team interaction, and thus, develop communication competencies grounded in practical use rather than perfect production.

Reflecting the key findings collected from the language education development, this study points attention at critical incidents as one of the pedagogical innovations suitable for modern language teaching.

1.2 Critical incident paradigms

Critical incidents (CIs) are life situations that catch a person unprepared. As such, they evoke emotions, activate thoughts, assume quick decisions, and incite to action. Remaining deeply ingrained in memory, they get revisited and reevaluated and used as experience moulding the person's future decisions, behaviors, and actions. As personal narratives, storytelling, anecdotal remarks, or elicited in a dialogue orally or in writing, CIs found use as an established qualitative research method in multiple disciplines.

The Critical Incident Technique (CIT) was first described by Flanagan (1954) as a five-step research procedure allowing for flexible data collection and analysis: (1) Setting the general aims assumes a clearly defined purpose of the study and related research questions; (2) Specifying plans involves defining details of the research procedures including a choice of settings, participants, and related objectives; (3) Collecting data means identifying suitable qualitative data methods such as interviews, questionnaires, or focus groups; (4) Analyzing data typically chooses the organization of findings into emerging thematic categories, and (5) interpreting and reporting entails practical implications for a particular field while considering potential bias or limitations.

The CIT was first used in American military practice to measure effective and ineffective behaviors of soldiers, pilots, or air-force officers, to improve battle leadership and organization (Flanagan, 1954; Miller, 1947). Soon, the technique found use in the industry to record the quality of job performance of employees (Miller & Flanagan, 1950). Thereafter, research centered at the Department of Psychology at the University of Pittsburgh (Flanagan, 1954) focusing on studying personality and human behavior in varied professions, e. g., managers, instructors, sales clerks, chefs, or teachers. It helps measure and evaluate job performance or proficiency, study motivation, define job requirements, improve recruitment procedures, or develop specific training programs for new employees.

Upon adopted in psychology, counselling, nursing, dentistry, marketing, social work, or educational practice (FitzGerald et al., 2007; Butterfield, 2005), the CIT developed within. From being used as observations of experts, CIs evolved into participant self-reports at the end of the 20th century, i. e. from serving as a "task analysis tool" as observed by the researcher, CIs found use as an "investigative and exploratory tool" seen from the participant retrospect (Butterfield et al., 2005). Lately, the CIs as participant reports contained reflective parts taking participant evaluations, comments, and interpretations into account. In this form, the CIT spread to further disciplines.

Intercultural studies (e. g., Apedaile & Schill, 2008; Spencer-Oatey, 2013; Thomas, 2010; Tripp, 1993; Cope & Watts, 2000; Brislin, 1986; Wight, 1995) introduced new paradigms and perspectives, seeing CI as "moments of prime importance" (Cope & Watts, 2000: 112) or "turning points in a person's life" (Tripp, 1993) that contribute to self-awareness and learning. Correspondingly, varied CIs as intercultural encounters have been collected, categorized, and analyzed (Spencer-Oatey, 2013) to be used as training materials in the form of role-plays, simulation games, or as a "culture assimilator" (e. g., Brislin, 1986; Wight, 1995) in educational practice.

This study focuses on the educational potential of CIs in language learning as a cross-sectional subject. CIs as "any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act" (Flanagan, 1954, p. 327) will be used to explore the complexity of views within one specific socio-cultural group. The micro-perspectives capturing emotional, cognitive, and behavioral patterns that individuals experience, report about and reflect on will be analyzed to draw practical implications for broad educational practice.

2 Methodology

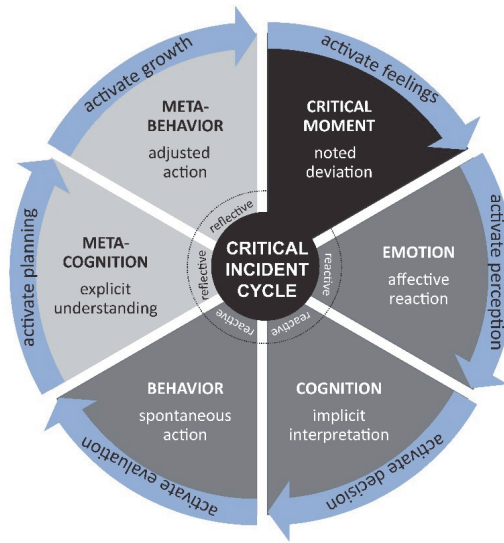
This paper emerged from the joint research conducted under an Erasmus+ international partnership project CIICPD (Critical Incidents in Intercultural Communication and Promoting Diversity) run by the SKODA AUTO University (SAU), Czechia in cooperation with higher education institutions (HEIs) from Germany (Westsächsischen Hochschule Zwickau), Austria (University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria), Italy (University of Siena), and Finland (Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences). The joint study (Sieglova et al., 2022) pursued cross-border variation in perceptions of students from varied demographic, socio-cultural, and disciplinary backgrounds. Two university-specific situations taken from the project database of CIs, one occurring during a HEI English lesson (CI1) and one during a student internship abroad (CI2), were chosen to present to interviewees to explore cross-cultural variation and patterns of their personal strategies and interpretations when facing challenges, ambiguity, or conflict. 34 students, with at least of six from each institution and balanced in gender, were interviewed in total. The data collected for the joint study, however, left an unused potential from the lens of the complexity of perceptions within one nation group. Data from the Czech research team, therefore, were subjected to a more detailed scrutiny below.

2.1 The Sample Critical Incidents

The following analytical section presents the sample CIs separately. Each CI is analyzed from the participant of the CI perspective first. Structured according to a general outline

inspired by the 3RA (report – reflect – reevaluate – act) tool (Spencer-Oatey & Davidson, 2013: 1), each sample CI includes a description of the participants, settings, scene of the critical moment (Report), the participant's reflexive accounts (Reflect), their realizations of their roles and learning (Reevaluate), as well as their decisions made, behaviors changed, and actions taken (Act). Based on this structure, the CI analyses can adopt the Critical Incident Cycle (CIC) model (Sieglova, 2023) (Figure 1) allowing for the pursuit of the learning potential of each CI, that is, to observe the process of transforming the implicit emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions, into explicit reasoning, broader understanding, and behavioral adjustments.

Figure 1
Critical Incident Cycle



2.2 Semi-structured Interviews

The participants' views from the two CI analyses were both contrasted with views from ten interviewees – SAU students studying in the Master's degree program, five male and five female. In the semi-structured interviews, the interviewees were asked to reflect on the reactive parts of the two sample CIs, that is, on the part of each CI describing the critical moment and the actors' first-hand reactions, i. e. emotions felt, implicit interpretations made, and momentary actions taken. The remaining part of the CIs retelling the

participant metacognitive and meta-behavioral reflections were not revealed to the interviewees, in order to get an unbiased range of answers. Thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Tuckett, 2005) was chosen as ae method for a qualitative data analysis focusing on identifying outcomes applicable to educational practice.

3 Varied perspectives to critical incidents

In the following section, the two sample CIs are addressed separately. Each of the two CIs analyses starts with the participant perspective that includes the first-hand reactions, as well as the metacognitive and meta-behavioral reflections. The interview analyses that follow are organized by emerging themes. The quotations from the student written or spoken accounts are left in their original form for the sake of authenticity. Minor corrections of grammatical inaccuracies or omissions of redundancies not impeding the content were made to facilitate reading.

3.1 Critical Incident 1 – The participant perspective

The first CI is a situation a male student was facing when on an internship abroad. In the reporting part (Table 1) of his narrative, the student first described the background of the situation providing information about the scene.

Table 1
Critical Incident 1 – Part 1.1

When I worked as an intern in Bentley, there was a moment when my supervisor told me he was taking a three-week vacation. The two of us were kind of an independent team, because while the other team was doing sales, we were dealing with the change management. We communicated with the salespeople about how much it would cost from the supplier, then we went to a meeting where there were representatives from finance, quality, logistics, but also engineers, and then the two of us discussed whether the change and investment were fine. So, his position was quite high, and suddenly he said he was going on vacation and that I can manage it on my own, that I didn't have to worry. I saw it as a big responsibility, and I was very stressed about it.

The student's detailed description of the team dynamics assuming a close cooperation between him and his boss and high responsibilities toward colleagues from many other departments, were at the same time a record of his first-hand interpretation of his emotional reaction (cognition), that is, an explanation of why he was "very stressed" (emotion). Simply said, the situation put him into a great discomfort. His momentary reaction to the boss (behavior) is only implicit from the analysis. Accepting the boss's assurance that he "can manage on his own" and "did not need to worry", it can be implied

the student expressed some self-doubt. Nonetheless, he obviously complied with the boss's request, as seen in the following course of actions. He first substantiated his emotional reaction with own interpretation of the different approaches of the British and Czechs to interns (metacognition) (Table 2).

Table 2
Critical Incident 1 – Part 1.2

They all are really very free, they believe that everyone can handle everything, and I really like that. We in the Czech Republic are too hierarchical, concerned about who is the manager, who is not, but this is not the case in England. So, I was very nervous about it. For example, when you change the light on that car for another light and you have to agree to it. I was only an intern there. It is also a difference when you work as an intern here in the Czech Republic and there, you have completely different competencies.

In this part, using his collected experience and knowledge, the student accentuated the difference in the leadership styles between the two countries, including the status and related amount of experience students as trainees receive. He, then, continued with assessment of his subsequent actions (meta-behaviour) in the concluding remarks (Table 3).

Table 3
Critical Incident 1 – Part 1.3

Anyway, the turning point came about a week later, when my boss was on his vacation, when I finally started to know what I was doing and what it was good for. I must say that at that moment I felt I made a bit progress – not only in terms of experience, but also in terms of ego. I realized that if I want something, I can do it, and if someone believes in you, you can do it even faster. So that was the biggest turning point.

The student's ability to not only realize his first-hand feelings, interpretations, and actions in wider contexts, but also implement this multidimensional experience into his future life is indicated in how he evaluated his performance. He obviously succeeded in completing the given tasks and gained understanding of the company processes. What is more, he realized that the situation prepared him to face future challenging situations with greater self-confidence and ease.

Boosted self-confidence, however, is not the only evidence of accelerated personal growth in this case. The student, of course, exercised a series of other skills. First, while speaking English as a foreign language abroad, he enhanced his communication skills and intercultural competencies. Based on this, he built important social networks useful in his future personal or professional life. Second, immersed into tasks and responsibilities of his superior, he fortified the 21st century skills set necessary to deal with at a workplace, such as problem-solving, strategy and planning, or cooperation. Last but

not least, being pushed out of his comfort zone, he raised own limits by taking over personal responsibility for others, building his management and leadership potential for his future career.

3.2 Critical Incident 1 – The interviewee perspectives

Besides the participatory experience, the CI analyzed above showed variation in perceptions of other students. The ten interviewees confronted only with the reporting part of the incident (Figure 2), put themselves into the shoes of the student participant, reflecting upon potential feelings, interpretations, and actions in order to see variation in interpretation. The thematic analysis of the data collected from the semi-structured interviews drew a number of prevailing themes discussed in the following text.

First, the interviewed students talked about the emotions they thought they would feel. Generally, most of them believed the situation would cause a varied degree of stress to them, too, claiming they would be *"nervous"*, *"stressed"*, or *"really scared"*, mainly due to the high load of responsibility. One student also mentioned she would be worried to cause damage to the company, in her own words *"ruin something important, some important contract"*, or even be held accountable financially in case of failure. While most of the interviewees related their foreseen feelings to the amount of responsibility, two students saw the problem rather in the lack of time for preparation.

Despite anxiety, the respondents admitted possible feelings. Two women would feel satisfaction from the confidence placed in their abilities reporting they *"would see it as a challenge, motivation, and actually even as a praise"*. Two of the male respondents did not even admit any stress but instantly reacted they would feel *"excited"* or *"happy"* seeing the situation as a great *"opportunity"* to perform. One male respondent, in contrast, reacted with anger while recalling a situation from his previous job feeling misused when given responsibilities of his boss:*"I was getting an intern salary and I had a like not a full time job, the job should be well rewarded with the salary"*.

This student was also the only one claiming he would refuse to comply with the task and quit the company. Convinced to feel *"very well mature"* he asserted that he *"would quit even in Bentley"*. The rest of the respondents, however, would feel an obligation to comply mostly out of respect for authority. For example, one *"wouldn't dare to oppose the boss"*, another one *"would like to complete the task as good as possible"*, *"would do [his] best for sure"*, or *"wouldn't want to disappoint [his] boss"*. Most of them, at the same time, did not hide the ambition that they *"would take it more like a chance to shine"*, or *"would like to make a good image in the company"*.

Besides respect to authority, the interviewees also discussed the issue of status in companies as interns. Besides the one student feeling misused when doing his boss' tasks, only one student experienced a similar situation when working as an intern at Mercedes Benz in Czechia. The rest of the students agreed that student interns in

Czechia tend to get "*less important tasks*", are *"supposed to do the support work not the main work"*, are *"at the very low level at the company",* or companies are *"less friendly toward them"*. Their explanations of holding a lower status as interns mostly referred to cultural differences. Some understood it as a mirror into the German company culture in the ŠKODA AUTO as *"leaders from Germany are more strict"*, one student saw it as a feature of the British study culture claiming that *"in Great Britain, students are more conscientious and diligent and therefore this reflects in the work environment"*.

Some, on the other hand, saw cultural differences in the attitude to responsibility claiming that Czech managers tend *"to be more responsible"*. One student even wondered that an organization like Bentley did not have internal processes set to delegate managers' responsibilities during their absence to another qualified and experienced employee. Others responded similarly and pointed out, for example, that none of their supervisors have ever left during their internships, or when doing so, they would always *"nominate a qualified representative"*. In short, most of the students saw the manager's attitude as *"irresponsible"* or not *"fair to be left out in the cold"* indicating a difference in socio-cultural perceptions of the attitude to work and responsibility.

Based on this, an interesting debate evolved around strategies the students would apply in this situation, again, proving they relied on authorities. Six of them, balanced in gender, would still expect a certain degree of involvement from the boss even when on vacation. For example, they believed the boss should *"still be there for consulting and help"*, or they would directly ask him if they could *"reach him during the period of the time when he's gone"* for advice, if he could *"back them up"* or *"be on phone",* so they could *"turn to him in case of emergency"*. Some of them also considered their supervisor as the main resource of information. For example, a few students pointed out the importance of *"not [being] afraid to ask questions"* directly, particularly *"as many questions as possible before he would leave"*, to *"make sure they understand all tasks correctly"* and know *"how to approach the task"*, so *"there is no place for mistakes"*. One student would ask him for a *"contact person"* in the time of his absence to consult issues to spread the responsibility.

Similarly, most of the students saw the importance of cooperation and networking when planning how to handle difficult tasks. They mentioned they would seek cooperation within the company. For example, they would *"find an ally in the office"*, *"agree on a strategy with other members of the team"* or would *"think about people in the company who could help with most problematic things"*.

Three respondents (one male and two female), however, would prefer to rely on themselves. One of them claimed he *"[wouldn't] need anybody else to work with on solving this problem"*. Two of them also laid down a clear idea of a structured strategy. The male student *"would separate work to little packages"* into what he can and cannot handle himself. Only then he would seek help from others. The female student went even farther explaining she *"would first need to balance her time"*, then, she would *"categorize*

her tasks into smaller projects" and delegate some tasks to others. Then she would identify *"the main tasks"* and *"split them into smaller"* ones in order to *"set herself priorities"* and focus on *"the most urgent or more time-consuming tasks"*. It is worth noting, though, that human networks where almost exclusively the main resource for handling the task. Only one student mentioned, after first making a joke she would *"ask her mom"*, she would consult *"a book"* or search help *"on internet"*.

This leads to the discussion about how the students assessed their studies as preparation for practice. More than half of the respondents believed their school provided good preparation for handling similar situations. One of the skills developed at school they saw as helpful was team work when resolving practical situations. Some also mentioned that team interaction is an opportunity for developing creativity or language skills, as they frequently work in teams with international students. One student pointed out that team work gave him chances to enhance his leadership skills explaining: *"many people are afraid to take responsibility or take the lead in the group. I end up very often in this position giving the orders what each member should do"*. Besides cooperation, deadlines and the load of school assignments, then, teaches the students stress management or resilience, as seen in the following remark: *"Because you get to stressful situations in school, you need to work somehow regularly, you get into discussion, in arguments"*. One of the students also mentioned developing strategic skills through simulation games in strategic management lessons. Another student pointed out the *"loads of presentations"* their school assigns in comparison to his friends, which he believes helps him develop good presentation skills. He purports that people *"should be able to present their work and talk when there are people around"* regardless being *"in management or in the automotive or if you are a teacher"*. One student also believed school gave them important know-how, for example in the area of management or human resources, another one learned particular computer skills in Excel, Word or Power Point.

Nonetheless, a considerable number of remarks indicated drawbacks in school preparation for practice. One student claimed that *"no one is preparing [them] for the responsibility [they're] going to have in the future"*. Another one suggested school should assign projects more frequently to help become *"flexible, not be afraid from the unknown, and develop soft skills"*, meaning *"that kind of skills that are not in the syllabus, that you can't memorize"*. Another respondent talked about a lack of motivation caused by the school evaluation and grading system explaining: *"my attitude to schools has always been not to have the best results, but the results I actually can use in my life. So, I was fine with mark 4, I don't lose time to learn something that has no value"*. This indicates his practical orientation as well as the inefficiency of external motivation through school marks.

Motivation was also discussed in the context of success and failure. All respondents agreed that succeeding in the task would raise their self-confidence and ambitions. They mentioned they would feel *"motivation"*, *"satisfaction"*, *"proud"*, or *"grateful for the opportunity"*. Most of them also believed they could build on this success in their

career development. Some would ask for a raise, some would seek a promotion within the company. One would ask for *"another like solo project"*, one would search for *"a new job in a higher position"*, most would put the experience in their CVs for reference. One student mentioned she would gain *"so much energy"* for further work, convinced that success in this task would raise her chances to work on more creative projects or in more inspiring teams like *"around people who motivate, young people with new ideas, with new concepts"*. Some students were more reserved aiming at self-development, e. g., one of them would appreciate that she *"gained a new experience, learned something from it"* but still *"would look back what* [*she*] *could do better"*. Another one pointed out that he would draw upon not only *"the positive things"*, but also *"even the negative things"* to be better prepared in the future.

Even a potential failure indicated a motivational effect in most of the responses. Some respondents mentioned they would feel *"sad"*, *"disappointed"*, would be *"angry"* or *"mad"* at themselves or *"lose self-confidence"* at the moment they failed, but long-term, most of them saw the experience as an opportunity to analyze mistakes and *"learn from them"*. Most of their responses were in line with one of the claims that *"failure isn't bad"* because *"it means, you are going somewhere"*. One student would *"try to work harder"*, another would apologize to his boss and *"try to fix the problem"*, another one mentioned that failure would motivate her to intensify her studies, providing language learning or sales management as an example. One student even saw failure as an *"enrichment"* allowing him to *"take the best out of failures"*.

In sum, while the respondent reflections mostly correlated with the feelings, interpretations, and decisions of student writing the CI, data provided a variation of views depending on a number of factors including personality, life experience, socio-cultural patterns, learning, or working styles. The respondents confirmed the situation to be predominantly stressful, mainly due to the unprecedented load of responsibility they have been used to as interns in their home country. Most of them would also accept their subordinate position as interns and respect the hierarchical orders and authority, and with only one exception, all would comply with the task and try to do their best while utilizing this opportunity for self-development and future career. The students tended to share responsibility through cooperation which is evident from not only the possible strategies they discussed in reference to the task, but cooperation and teamwork seemed to be appreciated as skill developed in their school.

The data, on the other hand, indicate further themes, such as generational change in the gender gap. Besides a slight differentiation in the emotional reaction between the male and female students when first confronted with the task, i. e., men tending to react with more confidence, boldness or criticism, no significant differences appeared further in the data by gender when discussing the cognitive and behavioural issues, such as the preferences for strategies and planning, attitudes to cooperation types, inclination

to specific professional skills, or directing their motivation and ambitions in their future careers. The theme of gender, therefore, will be given deeper scrutiny in the second CI.

3.3 Critical Incident 2 – The participant perspective

The second CI selected for analysis took place in a language education context. In the reporting part below (Table 4), the student described the circumstances that made him become the central actor in a simulation game.

Table 4
Critical Incident 2 – Part 2.1

This incident took place in our English lesson. We were divided into two groups and one of them was sent out of the room. Both groups were given a different task. The whole situation was to show the arrival of the other group as delegates from another culture to organize an event together. Our group was the recipient organization and event organizer. We were given the task of planning the first meeting between our groups. Within our team, I was elected as a leader. So, I immediately decided to analyze the main challenges that we must cover using a brainstorming method. The individual team members then took up the tasks and started working.

As indicated in the text, this incident was a result of the game's aim not known to the participants. Each of the two groups received different instructions how to prepare for their first meeting. While the participating student group was supposed to prepare the content and agenda and organize the meeting, the second group was instructed to focus on the socio-cultural aspects of socializing and proper introduction of the two cooperating teams before they started working. This led to the incident described in the following course of events (Table 5).

Table 5
Critical Incident 2 – Part 2.2

After the time had elapsed, the second group arrived, representing a delegation from Russia. I immediately realized that we did not ideally welcome our guests, so I decided to improvise. As a leader, I took the introductory word and started welcoming our guests and introduced myself as the manager. Then, I introduced my friend sitting next to me as my assistant. Immediately after saying this sentence, I realized that this was probably not the right position description towards her and I paused for a moment. Then, I left other members to introduce and assign roles themselves.

Based on the student's interpretation, he took the initiative during the preparation and, following the task instructions, started organizing the content of the meeting and the room layout, fully omitting to assign the roles of the team members and prepare for

the social interaction. As a result, after the second group representing delegates from a foreign country entered the classroom and started introducing their roles while adopting a series of culture-specific politeness strategies, the organizing team was taken by a surprise (emotion). The student, feeling entitled as a leader (cognition), spontaneously assigned his female colleague an assistant position (behavior). By pausing, he seemed to immediately realize that the assigned role to his colleague was inappropriate (metacognition). This is indicated in the decision described in the last sentence when the student stopped assigning further roles and gave the remaining team members freedom to choose by themselves (meta-behavior). In the following text (Table 6), then, he provided further insights into his interpretations and actions.

Table 6
Critical Incident 2 – Part 2.3

We managed to do the task by improvising and I can say that we have successfully delivered. The main moment seemed to come in the follow-up feedback from our English teacher. She had noticed this moment mainly regarding the discussed topic of gender equality previously in the lecture and highlighted it. Personally, although it stunned me, after we discussed the moment and my friend offered her view, I started to think about the moment differently and now I dare to say that it influenced me a lot. Fortunately, she took it as a joke, I explained the situation to her and we laughed together.

In this part, the student explained the realizations he made after discussing the covert interpretations of the incident in a focus group by not only him, but also the teacher, his "assistant" classmate, the rest of his team and the whole class. After the teacher raised the topic of gender issues, the female student classmate admitted she felt offended by being assigned an assistant position. She indicated having not only higher career ambitions, but also proved having equal initiative and competencies with respect to the organization, cooperation, leadership, and language skills throughout the preparation stage of the activity. This is also admitted by the student concluding remarks (Table 7) providing more rationale to substantiate his actions.

Table 7
Critical Incident 2 – Part 2.4

In my opinion, the position is incorrectly called the assistant, respectively it does not match their position. Unfortunately, nobody knows that the assistants stand organizationally outside the team to be able to react immediately as the leader delegates the tasks. In my current job placement, our department always works in this way. It is also related to the fact that it is incorrectly viewed as less valuable position, while the opposite is often true. Even though I am trying not to be influenced by this specific 'work-culture', the meeting day before this happened seems to have influenced me to act like this. What's more, towards the person who was most involved in the task.

Based on the last part of the student testimony, the woman, though not assigned the leadership role, seemed to take equal initiative during the preparation. This became obvious not only from how the student advocated for her own definition of an assistant position, but also from her classmate's admission that she was the most active person during the preparatory stage of the simulation game. This incident, therefore, helped the student to make important realizations and develop a set of practical skills that he can utilize in his future personal as well as professional life. First, he could recognize his strengths that include initiative, willingness to take risks, and an ability to improvise, as well as leadership, organization, cooperation, communication, and foreign language skills. This brought him respect from his colleagues and could have been the reason for being selected as a leader in the activity. On the other hand, he also conceived the principles of open dialogue, respect, tolerance, and self-reflection as key to functional relationships in contact with not only different cultures, but also varied social roles and personalities. Finally, he was confronted with changing social roles and varied perceptions in the area of gender issues, including topics such as women in leadership, male and female social roles, or changing ambitions across gender. These issues, correspondingly, predominated the discussions in the interviews analyzed in the next section.

3.4 Critical Incident 2 – The interviewee perspectives

The reporting part of the incident (Part 1 and 2) ending at the moment when the student paused after introducing his female colleague as an assistant was given to the interviewees to read and reflect on. The interviews were open with discussions about possible reasons the student hesitated. All the respondents believed he possibly realized making a mistake by assigning his colleague a subordinate position, but a great variation with some gender-specific tendencies can be observed as the respondents elaborated on their answers. While four out of the five men *"didn't see a reason why she should be offended"*, three women saw the student's behavior as *"arrogant"* or *"impolite"* and would feel *"offended"* or *"degraded"* if participating in the situation. Two women, on the other hand, *"wouldn't mind"* to be given an assistant role. This opened the following themes that predominated the discussions.

First, all respondents, regardless of their feelings, expressed some understanding for the student's need to improvise stressing he *"tried to do his best"* at the given moment without meaning to offend. Some of the respondents also questioned the first-hand interpretation of the definition of the assistant position. One of them pointed out that *"it's just a Czech dogma where assistant is a bad word"* using as an example the USA where assistants usually *"play a big role in companies"*, which resonated with the participating student perspective. Two other students confirmed this by correcting the assumed definition of an assistant arguing that there are *"two kinds of an assistant, one who is doing the calendar and this stuff, and the other one is like really a professional"*. Pointing

out his experience with the assistants for the board members from the ŠKODA AUTO company, one of the respondents accentuated as assistant position is generally seen as a *"valuable"* and *"a hard job"* in companies. One even observed a concealed power of women who, in his own words even though in subordinate positions, *"are like the great eminencies, people behind that lead"*.

At the same time, the discussions brought about the topic of leadership skills. One of the respondents presumed that the student *"was selected as a leader"* possibly because of his willingness to *"take the responsibility"* for the whole group. This belief repeated in the discussions with others who contributed with further specifications of the leadership skills set demonstrated by the participating student in the incident. For example, they pointed out he performed *"good speaking skills"*, *"improvising skills",* or good *"knowledge about the topic"*.

While praising the participating student initiative, the respondents, at the same time, raised the topic of a general involvement of students in their language classes. Some of the men saw a tendency of women to be more passive in school, suggesting that *"maybe it's not a fault of the boy, maybe it's a fault of the girl"* in the respective case. In line with this, others argued that female students *"are just lazy"*, want to *"lay back a relax"*, tend to *"freak out"* when they have to speak in the lessons, or do not want to be leaders *"because it's responsibility"* and *"more work"*. Others commented in the form of stronger judgments, for example: *"I don't know that many ambitious girls here that would step in and say, okay, I will be the leader. In my six years of study, I never met a girl that would do that in an English lesson*". It is fair to add that there were women among the respondents who disagreed. One of them saw herself as *"active"* and *"happy to have responsibility"* and liked *"to be selected as a leader because* [*she likes*] *speaking English*", another emphasized she enjoyed actively leading and organizing teams and a wide range of activities since her high school. What is more, even two male respondents admitted a certain degree of passivity in class activities attributed to women in some of the reflections, confessing they would also prefer to *"wait if someone would start setting the roles or the work"* or *"try not to be in the leading role"*. The involvement in lessons and willingness to take over initiative, therefore, cannot be narrowed down as a women issue.

Relatedly, some of the students, like in the previous CI, raised the question of the quality of education, content and the teaching styles that may have an impact on the student's involvement. For example, one of the respondents claimed that at school he tended to take the initiative only in topics or activities of his interest; otherwise, he *"calmly let responsibility for someone else"*. Another one, to explain why he tended to be *"a little bit lazy in English or another subject"*, assessed some subjects *"not to be useful in career"*. A tendency to be disengaged in lessons because of a lack of practical knowledge and skill trained in school could be found in another critical remark mentioning the evaluation systems. Again, one student objected against *"teachers punishing*

somebody during the activity without the results", meaning getting bad grades or losing points for passivity, claiming an inactive student in fact *"cannot be evaluated properly because truly you don't know the proper action of the students"*.

The existence of biases and stereotypical judgments were discussed when it came to the issue of the gender roles. Many of the respondents assumed that *"unfortunately, there is this type of stereotype in our country"* to believe that women *"cannot be as good as a man in certain jobs and tasks"* and tend to *"automatically"* think that *"assistants are usually the girls"*. Some overgeneralizations appeared in reference to gender characteristics, too. While men were conceived as more *"task-oriented"* or *"more aggressive"*, women were defined as *"more patient"* or *"careful"* on the one hand or *"are gossips"*, too *"emotional"*, or just *"seen as mothers"* on the other. A belief in a lack of self-confidence in women was spread across gender, women were characterized as *"more stressed"* when given responsibility, and more *"shy"*, passive, or *"uncomfortable"* when to take the lead or stand for themselves.

Based on this, the students, mainly female, raised the questions of social barriers women have been facing when pursuing their carriers in their country, providing two reasons. One was their prospective motherhood which, in the words of one of them, make it *"little more difficult for them to put themself through"*. Other confirmed this adding that *"women are under pressure a lot"*, because at a certain time of their lives, they have to make choices between family and career. Some women also realized they one day, they will *"have to slow down and focus on family more"*. Others did not see it as possible to balance work and life. One woman supposed the majority of women resign and prioritize family before their career. The second reason mentioned in the discussions were limits set to women in certain kinds of sectors. Among the specializations that the women felt disadvantaged were technical fields, as indicated in the following remark: *"Generally, there is this cloud hanging above us that women cannot have technical talents or are doing worse in math"*. Another testimony indicated man dominance in sale management: *"In the Czech Republic, it seems like a typical situation in the sales team, there are only men"*. And one female respondent even mentioned men's ego as a barrier to women leaders: *"It is quite difficult when a woman 'leaders' men. I know the men do not accept it well"*.

An obvious generational shift related to the gender issues can be traced throughout the data, though. For example, the students generally agreed that the current generation of students is *"less strict"*, more open, or free *"in terms of gender or sexuality"*, and they also tend to postpone setting up a family compared to the generation of their parents. One man even disagreed that women would face barriers in their professional lives nowadays arguing that he *"can't remember a friend who would be in leadership as a woman and would have some problem",* which correlated with some of the responses received from the women. While one of them admitted that she *"heard about some problems from friends"*, none of the female students would in fact report experiencing discrimination by gender in her life yet.

The students also seemed to be greatly influenced by their families and the changing attitudes to gender roles across generations. It was not unusual that the female students' mothers were in leadership positions. For example, one was *"the purchase director in a pretty big company"*; another one *"*[*had*] *her own business"* even though her *"granny was usually in the house doing housework, but her husband was the one who brings money and earns"*. Traditional family models, on the other hand, seemed to even accelerate the female students' emancipation in some of the cases. For example, one of the students described the role sharing in her family as a model of a woman being respectful to the man: *"my mother, she's very polite to my father, she does everything. My father does nothing at home. Like he doesn't cook, he doesn't clean. He doesn't do anything."* Because of this, she sets herself to become *"more independent"* in her future relationship. In some cases, the efforts to raise the chances for women even rooted from the parents themselves as implied in the following statement: *"if your parents support you, then you have better opportunities"*. One student added even a concrete example of parent support from the area of language learning reporting: "*my parents they always cared about my education, so as I loved learning foreign languages, they paid for extra classes, they bought me books"*.

Influence from changing external environments and public debate was, indeed, trackable in the data. One of the students mentioned that his generation is generally *"better at communication than the older generation"*. On the other hand, he also admitted that young people nowadays tend to be *"very easily influenced"*. For example, they form their personality traits and opinions from *"youtubers, actors, or singers"*. Another student pointed out the influence of internationalization of schools. While accentuating that universities allow them to *"meet new, different people"*, the respondents believed that this environment "*can open [their] mind"* or raise opportunities for women as *"the teachers show the way how …women can achieve the same things* [as] *men"*. A similar trend was observed in the company practices as reported in the following account: *"because of a lot of talks about women, women rights and about inclusion, it really helps when women are leading the companies"*. One student even saw a changing public discourse too: *"now everywhere they want to show and prove that women are also good leaders. The society doesn't expect the woman to be at home and to have kids at the age 22"*. One student also realized the privilege the university environment provided them when forming their modern views, as reported in the following remark: "*I still think sometimes we are living in the bubble, because when I'm speaking with a student here and people like from the university and then I go like and speak with people who don't study, I would say our generation is different"*.

It seems quite likely, then, that the social influence was also one of the determining factors in the general growth of women's ambitions. The data showed that while the male respondents tended to see their female classmates more passive in the earlier passages discussed above, the women expressed firm ambitions when discussing their

future plans during the interviews. While one exclaimed *"don't call me assistant please"*, another one believed that they are *"like a girl power"* generation. The female students' future visions ranged from establishing own entrepreneurship, for example, one woman *"can imagine* [*herself*] *having* [*her*] *own business"*. to aspirations for varied managerial positions. For example, one *"can imagine [herself] as a leader"*, another one *"would like to apply for a leadership position at a national level"* one day, *and* one would even like to break into sports management, explaining her ambitions in detail: "*from my childhood, I was figure skating in a synchronized team and I would like to be a leader of this because I feel comfortable, I know my skills. I know I am capable to lead this team".* What is more, most of the male respondents in fact saw their female classmates *"have leadership ambitions"*. One concluded that women these days are *"really self-confident about their future"*, another one believed that *"girls can, and they will do big things with their life"*, while believing that women *"are able to achieve something"* and *"they will succeed"*.

To conclude, as in the first CI, the interviews discussing the second incident disclosed an interesting variation in the respondents' thinking related to gender issues. While vastly agreeing that the participating student did not mean to *"offend"* or *"downgrade"* his female classmate, but was rather situationally pressed to *"improvise"*, his spontaneous reaction reflected specific socio-cultural circumstances, and as such, indicated some of the subjective interpretations of both, the participating student himself, as well as the respondents. Varied perceptions of gender based social roles and characteristics, institutional hierarchies, existing or non-existing social barriers, or attitudes to work and responsibility can be traced throughout the data. While the men tended to be more critical of their female counterparts in reflecting on their performance in school, women did not hide growing professional ambitions. What is more, all the respondents showed a significant degree of self-reflection, tolerance, and open-mindedness reflecting the dynamics and trends of the globalized world proving both, a changing public debate with respect to gender roles or social hierarchies as well as an evident generational change in attitudes as a result of the students' personal, educational, or professional experiences. Finally, the data reopened the topic of education and quality in reference to forming the students' attitudes to school and their motivation for learning. Schools need to react more flexibly to the changing society in restructuring not only their teaching styles, methodologies, or evaluation systems, but also content to better fit the students' needs and study styles.

4 Discussion and implications in wider contexts

The implications of this study embrace a wide range of implications. The multifaceted functions of CIs shown above indicate CIs as a flexible tool with practical applicability for multiple use across disciplines.

To begin, the two sample CIs were collected in a language course in writing and were discussed in lessons. As such, they allow for building situation-specific and individualized language repertoire and competencies using natural situations from the students' own lives. Besides formal language structures, using authentic CIs, students develop functional language skills, both, oral and writing, including storytelling, argumentation, discussion, or presentation. CIs, at the same time, can as case studies activating class discussion in which the students realize their socio-cultural perspectives translatable into intercultural competencies. Taken from varied contexts, however, CIs can serve as case studies in other school subjects helping to develop further set of the soft skills, such as problem-solving, negotiation, decision making, or planning, for example in the areas of human resource management, (international) business management, strategy management, psychology, social studies, political science, geography, to name a few. In sum, CIs used in school across subjects contribute to developing the whole set of the 21st century skills, including language, communication, and other of the transversal skills they will need to succeed in the future job market.

CIs, as discussed in the interviews, however, highlighted the need to revise educational approaches and set strategies to better fit the current social reality. For language teaching, the discussions revealed the student inclination to practical tasks that correlate with their willingness to take active involvement and motivation for learning. CIs, therefore, represent a suitable format for language lessons corresponding with the principles of CLIL. Situations taken from practice, as retold by students, can be used for context specific tasks that link with the student experience and can help them better prepare for handling various challenging tasks in school and later in work. CIs as case studies, at the same time, allow the teacher to multiply the student-talking time. They create more opportunities to draw the students into the class interaction more actively, expand their roles and responsibilities in their lessons, and thus, motivate for language learning autonomy and life-long learning.

Language skills, however, cannot be treated separately. As the student reflections indicate, they strongly feel a need to develop the whole set of practical skills to be prepared to handle difficult tasks in practice. Besides the above-mentioned skills, the student mention other soft or interpersonal skills they feel school should help them develop, such as cooperation and team work, diversity management, responsibility, stress management, resilience, or creativity. Schools, therefore, should redefine the learning outcomes in their institutional strategies to fully meet the needs of a 21st century student and integrate them into their programs and teaching practices. CIs are one such tool to adapt educational institutions to the demands of the future labour market.

This study also highlights the importance of socialization, internationalization, and practical training in student education and personal growth. Parents at home, teachers in school, or supervisors at work are important role models passing their experience and know-how on the students and opening opportunities for them while and giving

support, trust, and leadership. Schools, therefore, should reinforce their global partnerships and internationalization programs. They should also enhance cooperation with potential employers to provide the students opportunities to gain working experience and raise their chances to succeed in the globally interconnected world of work.

Limitations and suggestions for further research

The fact that participants in this study were selected based on their willingness to engage in reflective practices, a self-selection bias could limit the applicability of the findings to and broader population of students who may not engage in such practices. The study could be expanded by including a larger sample not limited to one HEI. At the same time, each partner in the joint study (Sieglova et al., 2022) could expand their study appropriately to gain a more comprehensive understanding among a more diverse cultural and demographic representation in the participant pool.

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