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CRITICAL INCIDENT TRAINING FOR DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AMONG CHINESE JAPANESE MAJORS: A PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract:

Japanese language programs at Chinese universities list “intercultural communicative competence” (ICC) as one of their educational objectives. However, their curricula tend to focus more systematically on language skills in assessment rather than on students’ ability to understand and respond in specific contexts. Critical Incident Training (CIT) remains under-explored in Japanese language education in China, particularly as a structured approach that organically integrates linguistic knowledge, cross-cultural reflection, and communicative behavior. As a conceptual paper, this study constructs a teaching framework for Japanese majors in China through a comprehensive integration of academic research on Critical Incident Training (CIT), Japanese pragmatics, and intercultural communicative competence (ICC). This paper integrates Kolb’s experiential learning, Mezirow’s transformative learning, Byram’s intercultural competence model, and Deardorff’s process model to elucidate how ambiguous situations facilitate interpretation, comparison, contextual explanation, reflection, and behavioral adjustment. The resulting six-stage framework, developed at the conceptual level, includes: presentation of. Critical Incident, individual interpretation, group discussion, cultural and pragmatic interpretation, reflective comparison, and alternative response exercises. Eight preliminary themes represent recurring cross-cultural-pragmatic decisions in Sino-Japanese communication; these themes were selected because meaning varies by context, multiple interpretations are possible, and interpretations influence learners’ subsequent actions. A hypothetical case involving an indirect response to a request vividly illustrates this framework. In the context of Japanese language classrooms, the framework links language and culture to reflection and performance, and provides observable assessment criteria for teachers to use during the evaluation process. Although the

framework is grounded in pedagogical theory, it has not yet been empirically validated

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Keyword:

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Introduction

Japanese language programs at Chinese universities aim to prepare graduates for careers in fields related to Sino-Japanese exchange, such as translation, education, international business, and diplomacy. When designing the curriculum, the focus is not only on developing listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation skills, but also on fostering an understanding of Japanese society and culture, as well as intercultural communication skills. Taking the Japanese language program at Guangdong University of Technology as an example, the university integrates Japanese language, literature, and cultural knowledge with the five major language skills and intercultural communication (Technology, 2020, November 17). It is evident that intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has become one of the explicit instructional goals of the university's Japanese language curriculum. However, although the necessity of cultivating intercultural communication skills has been recognized, doubts remain as to whether this objective can be translated into teachable and assessable classroom content. Based on published course syllabi, it is evident that a gap still exists between the stated objectives and actual teaching practices. For example, a 2023 syllabus explicitly stipulates specific requirements for pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, listening, speaking, reading, translation, and writing, including metrics such as vocabulary size, processing speed, comprehension rate, and text length (Technology, 2023). In contrast, intercultural learning outcomes are broadly defined as "an international perspective," "respect for differences," and "appropriate intercultural communication." Guangdong University of Technology offers a course titled "Sino-Japanese Intercultural Communication," which runs for only one semester, carries 2 credits, and consists of 32 class hours. In contrast, language and translation instruction spans multiple semesters. Many universities face a similar situation, collectively highlighting a pedagogical issue: the curriculum for intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is far from adequate. Furthermore, in actual classroom settings, students do not have many opportunities to practice intercultural communication and receive relevant feedback.

Intercultural communication courses still focus primarily on teaching cultural knowledge. Clearly, cultural knowledge alone cannot enable students to effectively interpret ambiguous information under situational pressure, evaluate conflicting interpretations, or select appropriate responses. The existing curriculum makes progress in language skills clearly visible; however, it is difficult to ensure the implementation of the iterative interpretation process required for intercultural communication.

The negative implications of this issue become increasingly apparent as graduates enter academic and professional settings. Tachikawa (2014) highlighted Japanese language majors' interest in business studies and their willingness to work for Japanese companies, arguing that strengthening cross-cultural insight and managerial skills would enhance the discussion's relevance to the workplace. Huang et al. (2024) expanded the evidence base through a study of 1,165 graduates from 2001 to 2020. Although graduates' career paths have become more diverse, the traditional "Japanese Language and Literature" training model remains influential. Consequently, they call for enhanced collaboration among universities, graduates, and employers to focus on curriculum adaptability with the goal of enhancing employability. Fortunately, research on Chinese employees in Japanese companies has helped concretize these requirements. The studies suggest that the adaptation process involves context-specific expectations, including reporting work, responding to instructions, expressing dissent, and assuming responsibilities beyond one's designated scope of duties (辻, 2020). Taken together, these studies reveal why, when learners need to infer indirect refusals, interpret silence, adjust politeness levels according to hierarchical relationships, or refine apologies, complaints, or ambiguous communications, relying solely on grammatical accuracy and cultural common sense may be far from sufficient. It is imperative to link students' career aspirations with the specific communicative decisions required by their evolving career paths and workplace participation.

The current gap does not lie in students' level of understanding of Japan, but rather in how they learn to interpret and respond appropriately in uncertain communicative situations. CIT has a long history in the field of cross-cultural training and has been studied in English-language settings and within the broader context of Chinese universities (Dong et al., 2022; Fiedler et al., 1971; Tran et al., 2019), yet the systematic application of this method in Japanese language education in China has not been fully explored. In particular, existing research offers very limited guidance on how to sequence the application of Critical Incident to help Chinese Japanese language majors organically integrate Japanese linguistic forms, pragmatic inference, reflection, and the adjustment of target language behavior. Therefore, this paper aims to explore why the Critical Incident Method is pedagogically suitable for this student population and how to systematically implement this method. The contributions of this paper include: (a) a set of preliminary cross-cultural pragmatic themes for Japanese language learning; (b) a six-stage instructional sequence that first guides individual judgment, followed by collaborative comparison and contextual interpretation; and (c) observable criteria for assessing contextual reasoning and flexible responses. The contributions of this paper lie at the instructional level rather than the diagnostic or causal levels: it reorganizes existing linguistic and cultural content around learners' interpretive decision-making and establishes a framework for subsequent empirical testing.

Conceptual Method

As a conceptual article, this paper adopts a synthetic approach to conceptual integration rather than a systematic review or empirical study. This integration synthesizes four academic domains: the historical and pedagogical development of the development and educational use of critical incidents; research on Japanese pragmatics and the cross-cultural pragmatic challenges faced by Chinese learners; established models of experiential, transformative, and cross-cultural learning; and classroom-oriented research on critical incident tasks. Literature selection was based on direct relevance to the paper's two research questions: which recurring communicative problems are suitable for Critical Incident instruction, and which learning processes should be highlighted in instructional sequences. This paper utilizes the literature to link concepts and derive design principles, rather than to estimate effect sizes or claim to cover all aspects of the subject.

By applying three screening criteria to the reviewed literature on Japanese pragmatics and cross-cultural education, eight themes were distilled at the conceptual level: (a) the meaning or appropriateness of speech or behavior varies depending on interpersonal relationships and contextual background; (b) multiple plausible interpretations may exist initially; and (c) the outcome of these interpretations substantially influences learners' subsequent communicative choices. The themes therefore represent recurring intercultural-pragmatic decision domains rather than a validated taxonomy or a frequency-ranked needs analysis. The six stages were then developed by mapping these decision demands onto Kolb's learning cycle, Mezirow's critical reflection, Byram's ICC capacities, and Deardorff's movement from internal change to external performance. The framework and themes are conceptually grounded proposals that require empirical validation with learners, teachers, and relevant practitioners.

Intercultural-Pragmatic Challenges among Japanese Majors in China

The gap is most visible when meaning cannot be recovered from literal wording alone. Indirect refusals, mitigated disagreement, silence, hesitation, and ambiguity require listeners to combine language with relational and situational cues. Taguchi (2008) is relevant here because pragmatic comprehension in Japanese as a foreign language varied with proficiency and with how conventional an implied expression was (Taguchi, 2008). Zhang (2018) then specifies the inferential work performed by advanced Chinese learners: they used keywords, background knowledge, paralinguistic information, and perceived intention, but nonconventional indirectness demanded more effort. Familiar vocabulary therefore does not guarantee an accurate interpretation. Request-refusal research sharpens the point (張, 2018). Wang (2013) found differences between Chinese learners and Japanese native speakers in when a refusal was anticipated and which cues supported that prediction (王, 2013), while Cui and Spring (2020) showed continuing first-language influence on Chinese learners' Japanese refusal strategies alongside acquisition of conventional Japanese forms (Cui & Spring, 2020). A learner may consequently hear *chotto muzukashii desu ne* ('That may be a little difficult') as uncertainty rather than refusal or treat silence as missing information rather than a potentially meaningful move. These studies are placed together because each isolates a different source of difficulty-expression conventionality, cue integration, refusal anticipation, and transfer-within the same interpretive problem.

A related difficulty is choosing language and behaviour for a particular relationship. Knowing the grammatical categories of respectful, humble, and polite language does not itself determine

the appropriate form for a given speaker, addressee, referent, or institution. Miyaoka and Tamaoka (2001) demonstrate the form-selection problem: native Chinese speakers found Japanese honorifics especially difficult when deference and humble reference had to be assigned correctly (Miyaoka & Tamaoka, 2001). Recent research indicates that this difficulty cannot be attributed solely to grammatical issues, as Chinese learners must also consider factors such as hierarchical relationships, familiarity, imposition, status, and personal style when selecting a register (Mu et al., 2026). The same reasoning applies to areas beyond honorific morphology. For example, when giving gifts, one must make judgments regarding timing, reciprocity, social obligations, and the recognition of value. When apologizing for being late or absent, one must thoroughly assess the attribution of responsibility, the explanation of causes, the impact on the other party, and remedial measures. Therefore, mastering this skill requires coordinating linguistic forms with social positioning and interpersonal goals, rather than simply repeating stock phrases. Similar challenges arise when dissatisfaction or conflicts emerge, as negotiations must address both the meaning of the communication and remedial actions simultaneously. When filing a complaint, a customer must describe the problem, gauge the appropriate level of directness in their expression, and articulate their request while avoiding unnecessary escalation; the service provider, in turn, must assess the severity of the issue, acknowledge its impact, and determine whether an explanation, apology, replacement, or refund is necessary. Tsuji (2020)'s interviews with Chinese employees at Japanese companies explain why this coordination is equally important in the workplace, as it involves appropriately escalating issues, following instructions, addressing communication problems, and questioning orders from superiors (辻, 2020). Evidence from the workplace does not support reducing these interactions to a fixed contrast between “outspoken Chinese” and “tactful Japanese.” This is because an appropriate response depends on role, relationship, the severity of the issue, institutional conventions, and prior interactions. Misunderstandings arise when participants disagree on “what must be said,” “what can be inferred,” and “what constitutes an adequate remedy in the moment.” Consequently, case studies designed for teaching purposes must retain sufficient details regarding institutional and relational contexts to enable students to explain why a particular response is effective in one situation but would fail in another.

When applying these case studies, the challenge for instruction lies in how to combine language resources with context-sensitive judgment. The eight preliminary themes selected are not general cultural topics but represent recurring areas in cross-cultural pragmatic decision-making. They include honorifics and hierarchical relationships, refusal, indirect and euphemistic expressions, silence and ambiguity, gift-giving, apologizing for tardiness or absence, service complaints, and broader misunderstandings between China and Japan. These themes stem from a comprehensive review of relevant concepts and were identified based on the following three criteria: Meaning varies depending on context; Multiple interpretations may appear valid at first glance; The chosen interpretation will influence the learner's subsequent actions. Furthermore, these criteria must preclude the possibility of treating cultural instruction as a deterministic comparison between “Chinese” and “Japanese” behaviors. Learners need to consider these tendencies without attributing them to specific individuals, while recognizing differences within both societies and testing their own assumptions. Since there is no fixed formula to guarantee a successful response, they also need to practice under conditions of controlled uncertainty. CIT (Critical Incident Training) meets this requirement by providing uncertainty that can be analyzed, discussed, and practiced. This set of themes is preliminary and selected for instructional purposes; it is not a validated taxonomy and should be refined through needs analysis and classroom research.

Critical Incident Training in Language Education

Critical incidents entered the field of cross-cultural education through two distinct traditions. Flanagan (1954) developed the “critical incident technique” to collect observations of significant impact and identify factors associated with effective or ineffective performance; the method was originally intended for investigative research (Flanagan, 1954). Later, proponents of cultural assimilation adapted these incidents into training materials, requiring learners to choose among multiple interpretations of cross-cultural interactions and subsequently providing attribution-based feedback (Fiedler et al., 1971). This distinction is crucial to the present proposal. Here, “critical incident training” refers to a classroom-adapted teaching method through which learners analyze brief interactions that become unexpected or problematic because participants employ different linguistic conventions, interpersonal expectations, or cultural assumptions. The term “critical” describes the incident’s ability to reveal assumptions that are typically implicit, rather than its danger or severity. This adaptive teaching method also replaces the search for a single “standard attribution” with a comparison of various interpretations, the validity of which depends on the available linguistic and contextual evidence.

In Critical Incident Training (CIT) activities, learners encounter linguistic and cultural expectations within interpersonal relationships that have specific purposes and consequences. They can propose multiple interpretations of these encounters, examine why the initial interpretation seemed convincing, and then attempt to modify their verbal expressions or adopt remedial strategies. Tran et al. (2019) are relevant not simply because they used critical incidents, but because their open-ended tasks in an English-language course produced a strong intervention effect on non-English-major students’ intercultural competence (Tran et al., 2019). This study supports a teaching model that integrates interpretation with target language use, rather than treating cross-cultural learning as cultural information detached from practical application. Revised responses provide the group with a way to examine what their previous interpretations mean in practice.

CIT and traditional culture instruction serve different functions. Knowledge-oriented courses can explain topics such as honorifics, gift-giving, apology conventions, or euphemistic ways of expressing disagreement, providing learners with resources they might not discover on their own. However, information presented in isolation from interaction may reinforce oversimplified rules—such as “Japanese communication is indirect”—and fails to explore when, why, and with what effects indirectness is used. CIT effectively addresses this shortcoming of traditional cultural instruction by altering the sequence of reasoning. Learners first encounter a problem, propose an explanation, and reveal the assumptions behind it. Only then are cultural and pragmatic explanations introduced as evidence to test these judgments. Teachers still provide the necessary knowledge but no longer present it as conclusions to be memorized. Delaying the explanation allows teachers to understand how learners arrived at their initial judgments before correcting them.

For Japanese majors in China, this cycle integrates linguistic forms, pragmatic intent, interpersonal relationships, and cultural expectations into a single learning context. In this way, grammatically correct expressions can be scrutinized to determine whether they sound too blunt, distant, ambiguous, or inconsistent with interpersonal norms. Learners can also compare various responses and rehearse alternative options before encountering similar uncertain situations outside the classroom. Evidence from three Chinese universities indicates that

critical incident training is associated with the development of reflective thinking and participants' perceived intercultural communicative competence (ICC) (Dong et al., 2022). Although the contextual limitations of this study preclude broad causal inferences, the same evidence suggests that national-level tendencies should not be viewed as fixed rules. Case studies should allow institutional norms, age, status, personality, purpose, and agency to interact with cultural interpretations. Intercultural incident training seeks neither a uniform "Japanese-style" response nor immediate certainty; rather, it aims to train learners to detect cues, suspend judgment, compare different interpretations, and devise feasible, relationship-sensitive courses of action. Therefore, a high-quality case study should neither lack sufficient background information to allow for evidence-based reasoning nor provide so many interpretations that the core interpretive decision is predetermined.

Theoretical Basis

Since no single theory can account for all the mechanisms in this study, this paper integrates four theories. Kolb elucidates the process of transition from experience to reflection to new action. Mezirow explains why an unexpected encounter may reveal unexamined interpretive assumptions. Byram, in turn, identifies the attitudes, knowledge, interpretive and interactive skills, and critical awareness that cross-cultural language education seeks to cultivate. Deardorff distinguishes between internal change and observable, effective, and appropriate communication. Taken together, these theories collectively explain how the "critical incident method" fosters intercultural communicative competence (ICC), while not implying that competence arises solely from exposure. These theories serve as complementary perspectives rather than interchangeable endorsements of experiential learning; each theory explains different transitional stages within the proposed cycle.

Kolb's experiential learning theory explains the framework's activity structure. Kolb (2015) conceptualises learning as a recursive movement among concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation (Kolb, 2015). In the "Intercultural Incidents Method," the incident itself provides the experience; the individual's interpretation and comparisons with peers make that experience the subject of reflection. Subsequently, cultural and pragmatic concepts—such as power, distance, obligation, indirectness, or face management—help learners reorganize what they have observed. Rewriting or role-playing a response tests the revised account in action. The theoretical value of Kolb is therefore precise: it shows what must occur between encountering an example and learning from it. An incident without structured reflection, conceptualisation, and experimentation remains merely an example. This sequence also explains why response practice belongs inside the learning mechanism rather than being added afterward merely to make the lesson more communicative.

Mezirow's theory helps clarify how learners revise their preconceptions about what they encounter. The frame of reference determines what people notice, how they assign meaning, and which responses seem reasonable (Mezirow, 1991). When learners are presented with the presupposition that "rejection should be straightforward," an indirect rejection can become a small disorienting dilemma. At this point, beyond a reaction of surprise, learners must point out the bias in this presupposition, examine the evidence, and compare different perspectives through dialogue. The desired change is not to replace the "Chinese" perspective with a so-called "correct" "Japanese" perspective. The goal is to establish a more flexible frame of reference that tolerates ambiguity, weighs contextual factors, and remains open to revision.

Teachers can ask learners: What led them to believe their initial answer was reasonable, and what evidence later caused them to change their answer?

Byram points out that this kind of reflective work contributes to the development of cross-cultural communication skills. His revised model includes: attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness (Byram, 2020). CIT mobilizes the development of these dimensions through specific tasks. Refraining from immediate judgment demonstrates openness; contextual interpretation expands knowledge; comparing different narratives develops the ability to interpret and make connections; investigating missing information and adjusting language expression hones the ability to discover and interact; and evaluating both familiar and unfamiliar practices supports the formation of critical cultural awareness. This correspondence is crucial because it avoids defining “success” simply as the repetition of a conventional Japanese phrase. Learners must also explain and evaluate in order to ensure that communication adopts an appropriate perspective. These dimensions proposed by Byram help teachers determine what learners have actually practiced during the activity.

Deardorff's (2021) links these competencies to outcomes. Respect, openness, curiosity, self-awareness, situational knowledge, and interpretive ability may help cultivate internal adaptability, flexibility, empathy, and a more comprehensive frame of reference; these internal changes, in turn, may facilitate effective and appropriate external behavior (Byram, 2021). For CIT, the distinction explains why alternative-response practice is necessary. It gives learners a chance to externalise revised judgement, receive feedback, and return to reflection. The model also sets a limit on the framework's claims: intercultural competence is an iterative development, not an achievement secured by one successful incident. Because the appropriateness of observable responses is relational and contextual, feedback should not focus solely on grammatical accuracy but also on how responses influence the interaction process. Figure 1 provides an overview of the relationships among these four theories; it does not represent an empirically established causal sequence but rather a suggested instructional mechanism.

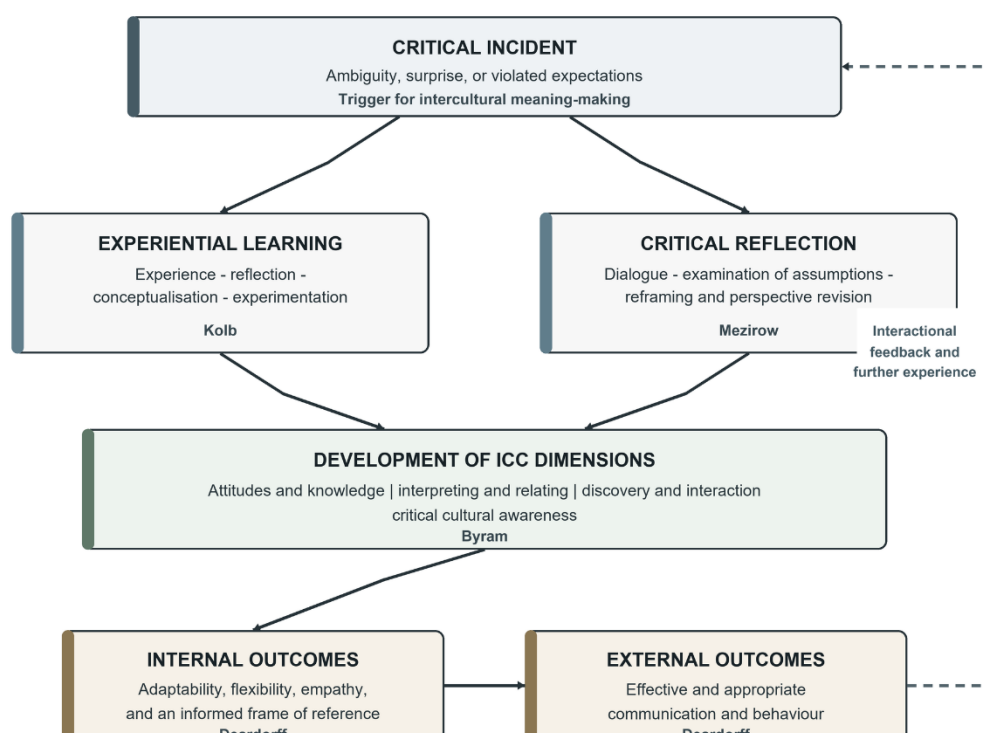


Figure 1. An Integrated Theoretical Account of CIT-Mediated Intercultural Communicative Competence Development

Source: Developed by the author based on Kolb (2014), Mezirow (1991), Byram (2020), and Deardorff (2006).

Figure 1 illustrates a cyclical process of intercultural competence development. First, a incident disrupts expected interpretations, thereby creating a need for reinterpretation. Personal reflection validates initial judgments; dialogue reveals implicit assumptions; new knowledge and alternative perspectives cultivate attitudes and skills related to intercultural communication; and response exercises test internal reframing through action. Feedback, in turn, becomes a new experience. However, if culture is taught as a set of national rules, none of the above developmental outcomes will occur automatically; instead, such incidents may reinforce stereotypes. Without language support and careful guidance, discussions may remain superficial. Therefore, this framework requires multiple reasonable interpretations, distinguishes between situational tendencies and deterministic claims, and provides learners with sufficient psychological safety to allow them to revise their own perspectives. These conditions are incorporated because the framework advocates a rational learning process rather than specific outcomes guaranteed merely by the existence of intercultural situations.

Proposed CIT Pedagogical Framework

This six-stage framework, constructed at the conceptual level, translates theoretical discourse into concrete instructional sequences. It is divided into the presentation of key events, individual interpretation, group discussion, cultural and pragmatic explanation, reflective comparison, and alternative response exercises. This instructional plan is a conceptually integrated intervention model that has not yet been empirically validated. Authoritative interpretations are deliberately deferred until learners have established and compared their own

interpretations; otherwise, the ambiguity that makes the event analytically valuable would be lost. Language, culture, reflection, and action are therefore treated as one process. This design follows intercultural language teaching that asks learners to notice, compare, reflect on, and respond to relations between language and culture (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Figure 2 illustrates the proposed instructional cycle. Each stage provides learners with content that can be examined or applied in the subsequent stage.

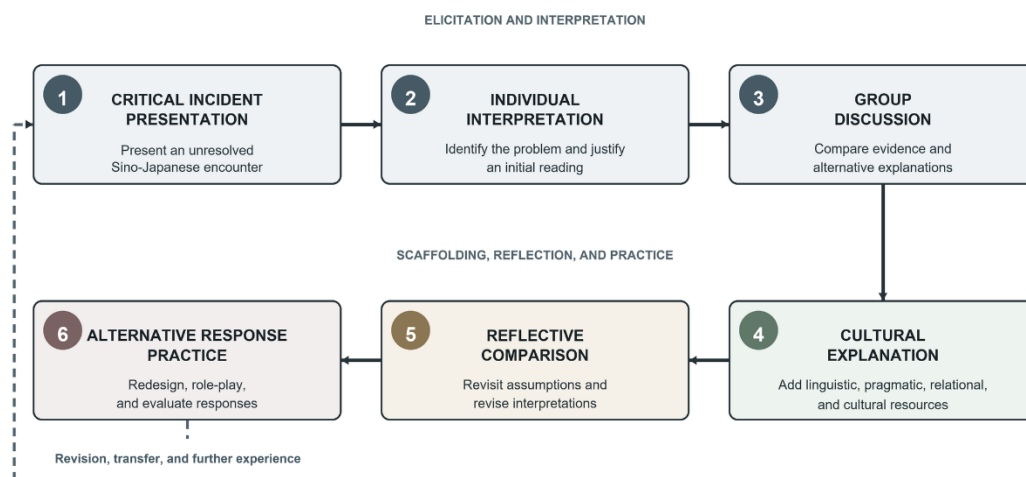


Figure 2. The Six-Stage CIT Pedagogical Framework

Source: Developed by the author. Solid arrows indicate the progression of one classroom activity; the dashed arrow represents revision, transfer, and the use of subsequent incidents for continued ICC development.

In the first three stages, the teacher records learners' interpretations of an incident before providing an explanation. In Stage 1, the teacher presents a brief Sino-Japanese interaction scenario containing unresolved issues, unexpected reactions, or ambiguous intentions. Formats may include written dialogues, audio, video, text messages, or teacher role-plays, provided that the participants, interpersonal relationships, and purposes are clear enough for analysis, while avoiding the prior revelation of any single cultural cause. Authentic or evidence-based incidents are preferred; if fictional cases are used, the plausibility of the incident must be ensured. In Stage 2, learners independently answer the following questions: What happened? What evidence supports this interpretation? What might each participant be thinking or feeling? What should happen next? Learners begin by writing their responses independently; this helps preserve assumptions that might otherwise be overshadowed by group members with more confident viewpoints and attitudes. In the third stage, group members compare their different narratives, distinguish between observations and inferences, and propose multiple interpretations rather than forcing consensus. Open-ended Critical incident tasks not only demonstrate the value of collaborative interpretation but also show that task diversity and instructional support are key factors determining their effectiveness (Tran et al., 2019). Initial individual interpretation is crucial because the records they provide reflect conceptual shifts, persistence, or revisions, which are indispensable for subsequent assessment.

In the subsequent fourth and fifth stages, evidence is introduced, requiring learners to reexamine their initial reasoning processes. Specifically, in the fourth stage, the teacher provides linguistic, pragmatic, interpersonal, and cultural knowledge related to the incident, such as the degree of indirect refusal, the social positioning encoded in honorifics, the

communicative function of silence, or the expectations surrounding apologies and reconciliation. Such explanations should serve as contextual evidence rather than rules applicable to all Japanese speakers. Authentic language samples, corpora, interviews, or comparative analyses from multiple speakers can all reinforce these explanations. Since learners cannot reliably infer unfamiliar pragmatic conventions based on discussion alone, explicit guidance is necessary (Ishihara & Cohen, 2014). In the fifth stage, the initiative returns to the learners, who re-examine their initial interpretations and decide which ones to retain, revise, or discard. Changing the participants' age, status, familiarity, or institutional context tests whether an interpretation holds across settings. Complementary comparisons-such as how Japanese participants might misinterpret Chinese customs-also prevent reflection from devolving into a one-sided adaptation to some essentialized norm. If learners can defend their initial perspective against alternative viewpoints and articulate its limitations, they may retain that perspective.

Stage 6 translates the revised understanding into action. learners can rewrite an utterance, complete a dialogue, propose corrective measures, or reenact the situation through role-playing. As long as they can demonstrate linguistic feasibility, interpersonal sensitivity, expected outcomes, and contextual appropriateness, a variety of responses are considered acceptable. Role-swapping allows students to experience different identities, such as requester and requestee, student and teacher, customer and service provider, or junior and senior staff. Feedback focuses simultaneously on language expression and the consequences of the interaction. This stage concretizes the internal changes defined by Deardorff's (2006) model and completes the transition to active experimentation proposed by Kolb (2015). Since practical performance also generates new evidence, this initiates a new cycle of reflection. When roles are switched, the teacher can observe whether learners have adjusted their understanding or are merely repeating the phrasing they learned for a specific situation.

Teachers can apply this cycle within existing courses, adjusting case studies and scheduling based on learners' language proficiency. Regarding specific implementation, the eight themes can gradually transition from familiar interpersonal contexts to institutional contexts. During repeated practice sessions, vary the participants, power dynamics, degrees of intimacy, communication media, and consequences to enable learners to practice cultural transfer skills rather than merely memorizing cultural differences. Learning portfolios can be used to collect initial interpretations, reflections, revised dialogues, and role-play assessments. The assessment process should evaluate whether learners can identify ambiguous cues, distinguish between observation and inference, propose alternative interpretations, and verify that their responses are appropriate and contextually relevant in interpersonal interactions. The research by Dong et al. (2022) is closely aligned with this assessment logic, as they place reflection at the core of intercultural communication competence development(Dong et al., 2022). Corresponding teacher responsibilities include designing compelling questions, facilitating comparisons, providing linguistic and cultural evidence, and supporting exploratory learning. Through the learning outcomes gathered, teachers can identify judgments that are more well-founded and adaptable across different contexts.

Example of a CIT Activity

The constructed incident "Does 'Chotto Muzukashii' Mean 'No'?" demonstrates how this framework operates in the classroom. After a student makes a request and receives an ambiguous response, the scenario integrates indirect refusal, vague language, silence, social

status, and pragmatic inference into a single context. Although this is not a report of an actual incident, such encounters may occur while studying abroad, during academic exchanges, or when communicating with Japanese teachers. Following Engelking's (2018) critical incident approach, this narrative initially records only what happened, without specifying the causes. Preserving this ambiguity provides learners with evidence to interpret, rather than cultural dogmas to be accepted at face value (Tama Lea Engelking, 2018).

Critical Incident Presentation

Li Ming is a junior majoring in Japanese at a university in China who was participating in a short-term exchange program in Japan at the time. He needed a letter of recommendation for an internship application. On Monday afternoon, he went to Professor Sato's office and made the following request:

「先生、急で申し訳ありませんが、今週の金曜日までに推薦状を書いていただけないでしょうか。」 (Professor, I am sorry for the short notice, but could you write a letter of recommendation by this Friday?)

Professor Sato paused briefly before replying:

「今週中ですか。ちょっと難しいですね.....。」 (By the end of this week? That may be a little difficult.)

Li Ming understood *chotto muzukashii* ("a little difficult") to mean that completing the letter would be difficult but still possible. He therefore responded:

「分かりました。ありがとうございます。よろしく願います。」 (I understand. Thank you very much. I appreciate your help.)

Professor Sato said nothing further, and as Li Ming left the office, he assumed his request had been accepted. On Friday afternoon, Li Ming returned to the office to ask if the recommendation letter was ready. Professor Sato seemed somewhat surprised and explained that he had not agreed to have it ready by Friday. Li Ming felt disappointed because he believed the professor had accepted his request, while Professor Sato believed he had already made it clear at the time that he could not meet the proposed deadline.

This incident can be presented in written, audio, or video form.

t. Instructors should initially refrain from categorizing Professor Sato's response as either an "acceptance" or a "rejection." An incident is pedagogically significant not because it is unusual in itself, but because it prompts analysis and reflection (Tama L Engelking, 2018).

Individual Interpretation

Students should first note whether Professor Sato accepted, rejected, or did not give a clear response to Li Ming's request, and explain the reasoning behind their judgment. At the same time, they should consider the possible meaning conveyed by the phrase "*chotto muzukashii desu ne*" and the pause that followed it. Does Li Ming's reply indicate that he and Professor

Sato reached a consensus? If not, what additional information would be needed to reach a clear conclusion? These questions require students to articulate their viewpoints, provide supporting evidence, and acknowledge the uncertainties involved.

During the individual writing session, students first articulate these hypotheses and then engage in group discussion. Some learners may focus more on the literal meaning of “muzukashii,” while others may interpret it as a polite refusal. The instructor has not yet prescribed any single interpretation at this stage, as the focus of the analysis lies in how students construct meaning by integrating wording, silence, context, and perceived obligations.

Group Discussion

Subsequently, each group compares different accounts and proposes at least three plausible interpretations. Professor Sato may have rejected the deadline, been uncertain about his schedule, wanted the other party to submit the proposal later, or felt that the burden posed by the request was obvious. For each interpretation, students must distinguish between the details present in the incident and the assumptions they have attached to it.

Wang (2013) provides empirical support for this comparison. Chinese learners and native Japanese speakers differ in their predictions of whether a request will be refused: learners place greater emphasis on the content of the request and observable behavior, while Japanese participants focus more on the burden involved and the perceived obligation of the addressee to accept(王, 2013). This finding does not define ethnic characteristics but rather indicates that interlocutors may assign different weights to the same contextual cues—precisely what the group discussion must reveal.

Cultural and Pragmatic Explanation

Only after the discussion does the teacher introduce pragmatic evidence. In this response, “Chotto” may soften the negative assessment rather than simply indicate a small degree of difficulty. Kato’s (2019) study is cited because, although these evaluative and euphemistic usages are closely related to everyday interactions, Japanese language textbooks often pay insufficient attention to them(加藤, 2019). In this case, elements such as “chotto,” “muzukashii,” hesitation, and the lack of a clear commitment collectively support—but do not conclusively prove—the interpretation of “refusal.”

The explanation must not collapse into ‘Japanese people are indirect, whereas Chinese people are direct.’ The short deadline, the importance of a recommendation letter, Professor Sato’s style, and the unequal teacher–student relationship also bear on the exchange. Culture is therefore weighed alongside linguistic, relational, situational, institutional, and individual evidence.

Reflective Comparison

Students should reexamine their initial judgments and explain whether and how their conclusions have changed. They need to identify the assumptions that initially supported their “accept” or “reject” conclusions, consider whether they equated the absence of an explicit “no” with consent, examine their expectations regarding teachers’ responsibilities, deadlines, or

commitments, and assess the risks of interpreting common expressions based solely on dictionary definitions.

The expected learning outcome of this course is to cultivate flexibility in interpretation: tolerating ambiguity, postponing conclusions, seeking contextual evidence, and revising judgments when supported by evidence-rather than replacing one cultural generalization with another.

Alternative Response Practice

Next, students pair up to reenact the dialogue and devise responses that both clarifies their original intent and respects the teacher-student relationship. Li Ming might say:

「今週中は難しいということでしょうか。」 (Do you mean that completing it this week would be difficult?)

「いつ頃でしたらご作成いただけますでしょうか。」 (Around when might you be able to prepare it?)

「締切について、もう一度確認させていただいてもよろしいでしょうか。」 (May I confirm the deadline once more?)

「今週中が難しいようでしたら、別の方法を考えます。」 (If this week is difficult, I will consider another option.)

This role-playing activity should be conducted with classmates, supervisors, or administrative staff members whom the students are not familiar with, to encourage students to respond flexibly rather than rely on rote memorization. Observers assess whether students can identify ambiguities in the other party's statements, confirm the other party's intentions, recognize the burden posed by the request, and propose feasible alternatives. Well-reasoned explanations and adaptability are more crucial than mechanically repeating so-called "native-speaker-style" responses.

This activity teaches more than just the fact that "refusals in Japanese are often indirect"; it also requires learners to clarify their understanding, weigh evidence against the context, revise their assumptions, and take action based on their revised judgment. It is through this process that linguistic knowledge is transformed into intercultural communicative competence.

Implications and Conclusion

In foreign language education, vocabulary, grammar, the four language skills, writing, and translation remain indispensable; they are prerequisites for understanding, expression, negotiation, and revision. However, relying solely on these elements may still leave students struggling to interpret ambiguous real-time conversations. The missing link lies in how to connect these resources to context, examine how different participants construct meaning, and adjust their interpretations when initial attempts fail. As Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) point out, language and culture are not mutually exclusive systems of knowledge, but rather interrelated dimensions of meaning-making (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Mastery of a

particular form of knowledge does not imply knowing when, why, or to whom it is appropriate to apply it (Ishihara & Cohen, 2014). Therefore, the focus of current curricula is on integration, rather than replacing language instruction with cultural instruction. CIT makes this integration explicit, observable, and replicable, without compromising the systematic development of language resources. Language instruction cultivates usable language resources; CIT, on the other hand, creates an environment in which learners can select, question, combine, and revise these resources in situations of uncertainty. Therefore, CIT should be integrated into existing curricula rather than appended as a separate catalog of cultural content.

Teaching and assessment must follow the evidence-based logic of this framework. With regard to teaching, instructors should guide inquiry and provide cultural explanations, enabling students to examine linguistic, interpersonal, institutional, and individual factors holistically, thereby avoiding the interpretation of recurring patterns as national stereotypes. Assessment, likewise, should not be limited to the simple recall of facts or the repetition of predetermined phrases. It is necessary to assess whether learners can identify semantic ambiguities, justify the validity of their interpretations based on context, scrutinize their own assumptions, propose alternative solutions, and adjust their responses based on feedback. This process model views intercultural competence as a recursive developmental process rather than knowledge that can be mastered through a single course or activity (Deardorff, 2006).

Since this is a conceptual framework, it cannot demonstrate whether CIT leads to quantifiable progress for Chinese students majoring in Japanese. It is recommended that future research track the processes of interpretation and response over multiple cycles, compare language proficiency levels, and examine the transfer of these skills during study abroad, internships, and in the workplace. Furthermore, needs analyses, classroom discourse, and evaluations by Japanese business professionals and Japanese language teachers should be utilized to validate and refine the set of themes initially established. Learners, Japanese language educators, and experienced conversationalists should also review the credibility of specific case studies while avoiding the promotion of any universally applicable “Japanese-style” answers. Future research could combine reflective writing, observation, role-playing, and interviews with appropriate assessment indicators for intercultural communicative competence (ICC).

This framework makes the process of interpretation, reflection, and corrective action assessable, thereby contributing to the teaching of ICC. Specifically, the framework provides a set of questions specific to Japanese language learning, a practical instructional sequence, and a set of criteria for evidence that focus on identifying ambiguity, contextual reasoning, generating alternatives, examining assumptions, and responding flexibly. Since these contributions are primarily conceptual and instructional in nature, future empirical research is needed to test the framework’s feasibility, learning outcomes, and transferability across different language proficiency levels and educational settings.

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