

Student teachers' recollections of a short-term study abroad experience: Critical incident analysis

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Abstract

One of the aspects that affect the quality of intercultural teaching is the teachers' international experience (Byram, 1991; Göbel & Hesse, 2008); therefore, to expose future teachers to other cultures, many universities encourage students to spend some time abroad. By means of critical incident technique (CIT), the study delineated in this article sought to investigate Polish FL student teachers' interpretations of situations they viewed as particularly memorable, surprising and important during a two-week teacher training program in Germany. Based on the recalled critical incidents, this qualitative case study additionally sought to establish the participants' intercultural orientation on the basis of the DMIS model. The content analysis revealed that the respondents recalled more positive incidents than the negative ones and that the accounts centered around two main categories: incidents involving cross-cultural situations and incidents within the Polish group. The results also indicate that the participants of the study hold a realistic view of their own country and are able to approach cross-cultural situations in an objective and mature way, which situates them within the ethnorelative stages of cultural development.

Keywords: critical incident technique; DMIS; intercultural sensitivity; initial teacher education; student teachers; study abroad; intercultural experience; culture contact

1. Introduction

A body of research conducted on learners of different age and in different contexts suggests that study abroad experience affects numerous aspects of foreign

language (FL) learning: intercultural competence (Behrnd & Porzelt, 2012; Jackson, 2008; Martinsen, 2011), cognitive gains (Lee, Therriault, & Linderholm, 2012), motivation (Szczepaniak-Kozak, 2014; Tsai, 2012), and communicative competence (Berg, Michael, & Paige, 2009; Llanes & Muñoz, 2009; Regan, Howard, & Lemée, 2009). Despite a growing popularity of short- and long-term mobility initiatives in teacher education, research on the impact of international experiences on future FL teachers is limited in number and scope. Moreover, the available studies are to a large extent focused on Asian students visiting English speaking countries, and little is known about mobility programs for prospective teachers in the European context.

With this in mind, this article presents a qualitative case study that sought to investigate Polish FL student teachers' perception of their experiences of a two-week teacher training program in Germany. A critical incident technique (CIT) was used to elicit both positive and negative situations the participants viewed as particularly memorable, surprising and/or important during their stay abroad. The student teachers' accounts were content analyzed with the objective of comparing the number of positive and negative incidents and identifying the categories of the reported incidents. Due to the nature of the study abroad experience, it was anticipated that many of the recalled critical incidents would be likely to refer to different intercultural encounters, reactions to cultural differences and inter- or intra-group interactions. Consequently, in the next step, it was planned to analyze the participants' intercultural orientation on the basis of Bennet's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), that is, a scale that describes individuals' reactions to intercultural differences on the continuum ranging from ethnocentric to ethnorelative orientations.

2. Study abroad in initial foreign language teacher education

One of the aspects that affect the quality of intercultural teaching is the teachers' international experience (Byram, 1991; Göbel & Helmke, 2010; Göbel & Hesse, 2008); therefore, it is important to involve future teachers in diverse mobility programs during their pre-service education. To improve future teachers' intercultural and language skills, acquaint with different systems of education and prepare to work in multicultural contexts, some universities insist that prospective teachers spend a certain period of time in a different country. Depending on the students' needs and the objectives of the mobility program, during their stay abroad student teachers may attend a language course (Bodycott & Crew, 2000), participate in academic classes, take part in teacher training courses (Czura & Pflingsthorn, 2016), take up employment or gain some teaching experience, for instance, by undertaking teaching internships in local schools (Ateşkan,

2016; Thomas, 2006; Myers, 1997) or acting as language assistants (Byram, 1994). The available research findings point to a number of potential advantages as well as drawbacks of immersion and study abroad experiences in FL teacher education.

After a period of time spent in a different country, student teachers reported that this experience had a positive impact on their intercultural awareness, sensitivity to cultural differences and knowledge about the host country and its citizens (Lee, 2009; Tang & Choi, 2004). Such cross-cultural experiences, home stays with host families and direct interaction with native speakers refined student teachers' understanding of cultural differences and raised their awareness of their own cultural identity (Tang & Choi, 2004). As Pray and Marx (2010) note, on return to the home institution from Mexico, American students, by and large, expressed more emphatic attitudes to cultural and linguistic problems their learners experienced. What is more, it appears that staying and working in a foreign country contributed to the participants' personal development, especially with regard to their general maturity, confidence, anxiety and coping strategies. In the long-term perspective, student teachers' enhanced open-mindedness and more profound tolerance of differences exerted a positive influence on their social skills and interaction with family, friends and colleagues (Bodycott & Crew, 2000; Lee, 2009; Tang & Choi, 2004).

Additionally, most studies indicate a positive relationship between international sojourns of future FL teachers and language gains. Lee (2009) demonstrates that participation in academic classes, exposure to FL television and intensive interactions with native speakers in both academic and social contexts enhanced Hong Kong student teachers' sociolinguistic competence and raised their awareness of different registers and varieties of English. Similar observations were made by Barkhuizen and Feryok (2006), who added that international experiences helped student teachers to lower their anxiety when speaking to native speakers of English. Evans, Alano and Wong's (2001) survey on Hong Kong in-service teachers revealed that after a four-week study abroad program their basic needs for a deeper linguistic and cultural experience were fulfilled and they felt more confident to use English. Still, some findings imply that sending students to other countries does not necessarily result in the development of communicative competence (Berg, Michael, & Paige, 2009; Tanaka, 2007). Despite a generally positive evaluation of the impact of the stay abroad on communicative skills, some participants complained about limited opportunities for in-depth interaction with native speakers of English (Barkhuizen & Feryok, 2006; Lee, 2009; Sutherland, 2011).

Some of the international programs involved different forms of teacher education, such as workshops, academic classes, school visits and work placements, which, in the participants' view, contributed to the development of their professional skills (Bodycott & Crew, 2000). Student teachers appreciated the high

value of such field experience abroad as it gave them valuable insight into a new educational system, offered exposure to novel, more communicative teaching approaches and provided them with an opportunity to receive constructive feedback from both their regular instructors and local teachers (Barkhuizen & Feryok, 2006; Czura & Pflingsthor, 2016; Hepple, 2012; Yang, 2011). Additionally, the need to document such teaching experiences abroad in diaries or logs prompted them to analyze their own strengths and weaknesses, and thus contributed to the development of reflective skills (Hepple, 2012; Yang, 2011). On the other hand, Trent, Gao and Gu (2014) indicate that after being exposed to a different education system, the participants constructed conflicting teacher identities.

Although, according to the research presented above, the advantages of mobility programs for future FL teachers clearly outnumber the disadvantages, some problems and shortcomings are also evident. To maximize the educational value of such international programs, it is recommended that sojourners receive support at all stages of their mobility experience: at the preparatory stage, during the stay abroad and after their return to the home institution (Barkhuizen & Feryok, 2006; Egli Cuenat et al., 2015; Milby, Rhodes & Scott, 2015; Pray & Marx, 2010). Finally, the success of a study abroad program for future teachers depends to a large extent on responsiveness and close cooperation between the host and home institutions and their willingness to react promptly to problematic situations and to introduce ongoing modifications to the program (Barkhuizen & Feryok, 2006; Yang, 2011).

3. LETTA – Learning English through the Arts IP

In order to promote student mobility, the Lifelong Learning Program (LLP) of the European Commission, lasting from 2007 to 2013, offered an opportunity to apply for the funding and to organize an Intensive Program (IP), which involved short courses addressed to students of higher education from at least three different countries. Such projects could last from two to six weeks and focused on any innovative topic that was not included in the standard curriculum and, thus, enabled the participants to develop knowledge and skills beyond those covered in the home institution.

With these goals in mind, in 2014, Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg, Germany, organized an IP entitled *LETTA – Learning English through the Arts* for 59 student teachers from four European countries (Germany, Poland, Lithuania and Turkey). The LETTA IP aimed to find possible ways of applying the Learning Through the Arts (LTTA) education model in FL learning. LTTA was introduced in the mid-1990s in Canada under the assumption that enriching general curricula with art-related elements would support the acquisition of knowledge and improve the

learning process. This claim has been supported by a body of empirical studies which revealed a positive emotional, physical, cognitive and social impact of the program (Catterall, 1998; Deasy, 2002; Elster, 2001; Pitman, 1998).

In essence, the participation of pre-service teachers from the four educational contexts in this mobility initiative intended to foster a deeper understanding of European curricula and FL learner needs in different educational settings. Additionally, it was hoped that a course based on an interdisciplinary approach to language instruction would enable prospective FL teachers to develop strategies to integrate content in a cross-curricular manner. Last but not least, to enrich international integration between individuals from different countries, the IP encouraged extensive cross-cultural collaboration among pre-service teachers, university staff and student teachers.

Every attempt was made to maintain a proper balance between theoretical foundations, research findings and classroom applications of the new approach and to this end the IP included lectures, tutorials, workshops, school visits and a field trip to the local museum, coordinated by university staff, teacher trainers, teachers and local artists. Apart from strictly academic objectives, the IP involved a number of social initiatives and excursions that enabled the participants to forge international contacts and sensitized them to cultural diversity. In total, the student teachers participated in 20-30 contact hours per week, which amounted to 3 ECTS (European Credit Transfer System).¹

The teacher training course centered around three major milestones.² With the aim to establish common ground between the students from different countries of origin, the first milestone focused on the analysis of different approaches to foreign language teaching and national curricula for FL and arts teaching in the respective countries. Additionally, student teachers visited local schools to observe English and art-related classes, which enabled them to examine how German curricular guidelines were applied in school practice. The second milestone was devoted to presenting theoretical foundations and discussing practical application of the LTTA model in FL teaching. In particular, it was analyzed how different forms of arts, such as painting, music, creative writing, drama and graffiti can be introduced into the regular FL classroom at different stages of education. Then, in international groups, the students were involved in the process of adapting, designing and evaluating teaching resources and lesson plans that included elements of different arts disciplines. The last

¹ More information is available at http://ec.europa.eu/education/resources/european-credit-transfer-accumulation-system_en

² A detailed programme of the LETTA IP is available at the project website: <http://englische-fachdidaktik.com/Gehring2/content/our-program-location> and in Pfinghsthorn and Czura (2017, p. 127-128).

milestone consisted in the final presentation, recapitulation and general evaluation of the program and its teacher training objectives.

4. Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)

Since the present study is based on the analysis of subjective interpretations of critical incidents that happened during a teaching course abroad, it was anticipated that a significant portion of the incidents would make references to cross-cultural issues. In this light, the DMIS model was selected to constitute a conceptual model of analyzing the participants' intercultural orientation. Developed by Bennett (1993, 2004) after years of observations, DMIS describes different ways individuals understand and react to cultural difference. According to the model, the exposure to new cultures, languages and intercultural situations may bring about changes in the perception of cultural differences and accelerate progress on a continuum of worldviews ranging from ethnocentric to ethnorelative orientations. The former can be defined as "the experience of one's own culture as 'central to reality'" (Bennett, 2004, p. 62), whereas being ethnorelative means "being comfortable with many standards and customs and to having an ability to adapt behavior and judgments to a variety of interpersonal settings" (Bennett, 1993, p. 26). Both ethnocentric and ethnorelative stages are further divided into three subsequent categories.

Denial of cultural deference, positioned as the most ethnocentric element of DMIS, is characteristic of individuals who perceive their own culture as the only "real one", show no interest in learning about other systems, fail to notice any cultural differences and hold rather simplistic views of how culture affects their own and other people's lives. When faced with a cultural difference, people at denial make aggressive attempts to avoid or to eliminate it (Bennett 1993; 2004). The second stage of DMIS, referred to as *defense against difference*, assumes a high degree of polarization between "us and them" and often involves negative stereotyping. Being aware that cultural differences exist, individuals regard their own culture as superior, whereas other cultures are believed to be of lesser significance. A possible alternative to the defense orientation is the *reversal*, which is typical of individuals who tend to regard the adopted culture as superior and, at the same time, belittle the culture they come from (Bennett 1993, 2004). Finally, the last ethnocentric stage, *minimization of cultural difference*, consists in a simplistic belief that all human beings are essentially the same and, for this reason, knowledge of intercultural differences is not necessary to maintain effective communication. Whereas individuals at the minimization stage are able to notice rather basic intercultural differences, linked to traditions, eating habits

or clothing, they fail to understand the importance of culture for such fundamental aspects of human life as values, beliefs and worldviews (Bennett 1993, 2004).

At *acceptance*, the first stage of the ethnorelative orientation, people understand that their own culture is one of many cultures in the world and, consequently, one's cultural identity affects everyday routines, behavior patterns, principles and beliefs. However, the acknowledgement of cultural differences does not necessarily mean approval – individuals may not be fond of certain disparities between cultures, but they are able to accept them (Bennett 1993, 2004). The next stage, *adaptation to cultural differences*, assumes that "the experience of another culture yields perception and behavior appropriate to that culture" (Bennett, 2004, p. 70). An individual is emphatic and open-minded enough not to interpret a given situation from the perspective of their own cultural context only. As careful observers, they are willing to adapt their behavior to the interlocutor(s) in a particular situation (Bennett 1993, 2004). The most advanced ethnorelative orientation is referred to as *integration of cultural difference*. At this stage, rather than being confined to one culture only, individuals are bi- or even multicultural and can interpret a novel situation from a variety of cultural perspectives. Their beliefs, behaviors and worldviews are representative of many cultures they have encountered in their lives. Despite being the most ethnorelative stage, integration is not a prerequisite of successful cross-cultural communication. In fact, the instructional programs that prepare participants for international sojourns target at the stage of adaptation to cultural difference, which is believed sufficient in cross-cultural situations (Bennett, 2004).

5. Method

The aim of the study was to collect student teachers' recollections of both positive and negative critical incidents that happened during the IP and analyze their reactions and subjective opinions concerning the causes and effects of those situations. Content analysis of the responses helped to find answers to the following research questions:

1. Did the student teachers focus more often on positive or negative critical incidents?
2. What aspects of the stay abroad did the student teachers recall in their accounts of critical incidents?
3. Did the student teachers tend to exhibit ethnocentric or ethnorelative beliefs and behaviors in their choice and interpretation of the critical incidents?

5.1. Participants

The critical incidents were reported by 6 out of 14 Polish students who had participated in the LETTA intensive program and agreed to take part in the interviews. All respondents were female and studied English at a large university in Poland. The sample consisted of both BA and MA students (with 3:3 ratio), who at the time of the IP attended the Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) course in order to receive nationally acknowledged qualifications to teach English. Recruitment to the IP was conducted on a voluntary basis. The author of this article took part in the LETTA IP as an instructor of one of the national groups.

5.2. Research methodology – CIT

The data in this study was collected by means of a critical incident technique (CIT), which can be defined as:

a qualitative interview procedure which facilitates the investigation of significant occurrences (events, incidents, processes, or issues) identified by the respondent, the way they are managed, and the outcomes in terms of perceived effects. The objective is to gain understanding of the incident from the perspective of the individual, taking into account cognitive, affective, and behavioral elements (Chell, 1998, p. 56).

CIT is a set of clearly defined procedures used in retrospective qualitative research and aims to collect, analyze and categorize the observations of human behavior (Flanagan, 1954). Tripp (1993, p. 3) underlines that “a critical incident is an interpretation of the significance of the event”, which indicates that apart from eliciting purely descriptive data, CIT also prompts the respondents to interpret the situation, analyze their own reactions and provide a general evaluation of the incident and its consequences. The added value of this elicitation technique is that incidents are not imposed and, thus, the respondents are free to select any situation they consider relevant to the context of the study. CIT was introduced into social studies by John Flanagan (1954) and since then it has been used, for instance, in service studies (Bitner, Booms & Tetreault, 1990; Gremler, 2004), hospitality research (Callan, 1998) and general teacher education (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011). In recent years, CIT has also been applied in studies concerning such aspects of second language teaching and learning as sociolinguistic competence (Kuchuk, 2012), intercultural competence (McAllister et al., 2006; McClure, 2007) and learners’ experiences of foreign language learning (Czura, 2017; Finch, 2010). As the range of topics indicates, CIT can be used to elicit qualitative data that is focused on a specific aim or thematic detail, and the participants’ perceptions are analyzed on the basis of a concrete situation. It must be noted that CIT

is understood here as a qualitative research procedure that can be used in a number of contexts and, thus, should not be limited to the application of critical incidents as a pedagogical tool for triggering pre-/in-service teachers' reflection on their teaching practice (e.g., Farrell, 2008; Gabryś-Barker, 2012; Tripp, 1993).

Although critical incidents may be collected by way of group interviews, written surveys or observations, most studies employ individual interviews as they allow more individualized and in-depth analysis of each significant account. During an interview the respondents tell a story of a selected experience, whereas the interviewer may ask additional questions concerning the incident. Before data collection, researchers need to explicitly define what a critical incident is in the context of the study since, as Gremler (2004) observed, using a generic definition may not fully embrace the research objective. Additionally, it is advised to provide criteria each story needs to meet to be treated as a critical incident in further analysis (Gremler, 2004). Similar to any other qualitative research technique, the process of categorizing critical incidents may be either based on a selected theoretical model or developed in the process of inductive interpretation (Strauss, 1993).

5.3. Data collection

Critical incidents were collected by the author during individual interviews (five face-to-face and one on *Skype*). The interviews took place when all the academic classes taught by the researcher and attended by the respondents were completed, that is approximately one year after the LETTA program. Due to the time that elapsed between the IP and the interview, the participants were given the instructions a few days before the interview session. They were instructed to recall at least three either positive or negative situations during the LETTA course that they considered to have been particularly important, puzzling or interesting. The choice of critical incidents was not restricted in any way – it could involve any person and take place in any location, both in academic and social situations as long as it happened during the two weeks they spent abroad. During the interviews, in order to gain more in-depth understanding of the respondents' reaction to as well as personal interpretation of each incident, a few additional questions were asked, for instance "Why do you consider this incident as particularly positive/negative?", "How did you react?", "Why do you think it happened?", "Would you change anything if you were given an opportunity?". On average, each interview lasted approximately 15 minutes. The obtained data were recorded, transcribed and content analyzed by the author. The relevant fragments of the interviews were translated into English, and the respondents' names were replaced with pseudonyms.

6. Results

For the purposes of the study, an event recalled by the respondents was identified as a critical incident only when it: (1) referred to a concrete, easily identifiable situation; (2) could be interpreted as either positive or negative; and (3) offered sufficient detail for content analysis. Any responses that failed to meet these three conditions were discarded from further analysis. In total, the respondents provided 25 accounts; however, since two accounts offered a general evaluation of the intensive program and one lacked sufficient detail, these three accounts were not identified as critical incidents. Table 1 provides a numerical summary of the recalled incidents. It appears that student teachers placed more emphasis on positive situations and the incidents can be divided into two general categories: (1) incidents in cross-cultural situations, which included all incidents in which the respondents mentioned people or objects coming from other cultures; and (2) incidents that involved other Polish participants. The majority of the critical incidents focused on situations involving individuals from different national and cultural backgrounds, for instance other IP participants, local organizers, school teachers and pupils, passers-by, librarians and service workers in both academic and social situations. Five out of 22 incidents pertained to the interactions within the Polish group, touching on such issues as group cohesion, cooperation and pursuit of common objectives. The presentation of the qualitative analysis will start with the incidents involving cross-cultural situations, and then the incident within the Polish group will be attended to. Due to space limitations, only selected, yet representative, fragments of the interviews will be presented.

Table 1 Categories of critical incidents reported in the study

CATEGORIES OF CRITICAL INCIDENTS	POSITIVE INCIDENTS	NEGATIVE INCIDENTS	TOTAL
Incidents involving cross-cultural situations:	10	7	17
interactions with other national groups	4	5	
interactions with local people	3	2	
reactions to a German university	3	0	
Incidents within the Polish group	3	2	5
Total	13	9	22

6.1. Incidents involving cross-cultural situations

Within this category, three further subcategories of critical incidents were identified: accounts (1) involving interactions with other participants of the workshop,

(2) referring to interactions with local people outside the university, and (3) focused on student teachers' reactions to the host institution.

In the category of critical incidents focused on interactions with other national groups the negative incidents prevailed. The most serious problem indicated by four respondents referred to the limited contact with students from one of the countries. It appeared that except for during the classes and collaborative tasks, that group was not willing to socialize beyond their own circle.

I was so sad. (...) This training trip was supposed to bring us closer to other cultures, other countries and then it appeared that one group was difficult to get through to. Unlike students from [two other countries] [Mona].

I am not saying that everyone (...) I do not know whether it is a stereotype or my subjective impression. But there was no reaction to 'Hi!' (...) I do not know them as a nation so maybe they are like this. I don't want to judge them. It's hard to say from this perspective [Natalie].

The utterances above indicate that in their interpretations of those critical incidents the respondents voiced rather conciliatory and level-headed opinions, void of culture-specific generalizations and stereotyping. Only one student, Eva, half-jokingly, made a fairly biased and stereotypical comment about the situation "well, the girls had very strong characters, and later I realized that their prime minister is a woman".

Another incident appeared critical to Eva, who was puzzled by close contact one of the instructors had with her students:

What surprised me was her contact with her students. It was... er... a bit too much. As if she didn't keep the distance between herself and her group. It might be because I come from a different culture, in which it is not entirely possible. I do not know how to explain it.

Here, the student tried to understand the disturbing incident she observed. At first she attempted to justify this by referring to typical student-teacher relationship in her own culture, only to conclude that she was not able to find a definite answer.

Another negative situation was recalled by Katharine who was surprised when, while working in groups, one student tried to impose her opinion on others:

I was a bit shocked at that situation as she really wanted, at all costs, to force her idea on us even though, objectively speaking, it wasn't better than ours. (...) I told her that we were working in a group so we need to cooperate somehow, and we need to decide by a majority.

Even though during the interview Katharine mentioned the girl's nationality, this aspect did not seem to be important in the interpretation of the incident – what

mattered was the inappropriateness of that girl's behavior against universally accepted values and norms.

In contrast, Dena recalled an example of active and effective cooperation she experienced while working in international groups:

it was the first time I had experienced such team spirit. For instance, at the university or in other situations never had the collaboration been so fruitful. And there were no conflicts. Someone came up with an idea and another person was able to use it to dream up something even better. I'd love to have another opportunity to work with such a great team. And we were put together into groups at random! [Dena]

It is worth underlining here that Dena did not mention the team members' nationality – it appears that for her the most important aspect was the high quality of work, not the country of origin.

The remaining respondents also appreciated friendliness and amiability of one of the national groups. Mona, for instance, was moved by the farewell the Polish group received from nearly all the students from that group ("When we were about to leave, [they] appeared out of nowhere and said that they simply had to say goodbye. It was so nice!"). Such openness prompted the respondents to draw intercultural comparisons and, at the same time, analyze their own cultural identity. It is visible in Natalie's declaration: "[they] are generally more open to everyone (...) and we, the Poles, well, it's obvious we are less open".

The critical incidents involving interactions with local people embraced three positive and two negative situations that happened outside the university and did not involve other participants of the IP. One person was positively surprised when she received an involuntary help from a stranger in the street, whereas Eva referred to meeting German teachers and students:

The pupils were so open. (...) All teachers were very nice and even apologized to us for not speaking Polish, and we apologized to them for not speaking German. I was so surprised that anyone can apologize for such a thing!

Dena, on the other hand, recalled a school visit during which the teacher she observed disclosed some personal information about one of the students to them to explain his behavior. When asked to interpret the teacher's behavior, she said, "For me, it was a broad generalization, as if she wanted to avoid the problem". This response implies that the situation was astonishing for the student not because it resulted from an intercultural difference or misunderstanding, but because she judged the teacher's reaction in that particular situation as inappropriate and unprofessional. It suggests that Dena interpreted the teacher's behavior from a culture-general per-

spective (cf. Gudykunst & Hammer, 1984), which allowed her to build an understanding of the situation without resorting to culture-specific labels and national stereotypes.

Yet another student was surprised when she had nearly been knocked down by a cyclist on a cycling lane on their day trip to the Netherlands:

He didn't apologize as if it had been my own fault. But later I heard that it is typical of the Dutch – they think they always have right of way when cycling so you need to look out for them. They never look out for you. (...) It was a hard landing <laughter> [Natalie].

Even though at first the cyclist's behavior was astonishing and prompted a negative evaluation, later Natalie tried to find an explanation for this unexpected event. Once the student became aware of the cultural difference, she recalled the incident as a humorous event and concluded the story with laughter.

It also seems natural that university student teachers paid attention to similarities and differences between their own and the German university they visited. In her accounts of positive critical incidents, Kathrine indicated two aspects of studying in Germany she found appealing – she valued the openness of other students in the university canteen (“it was natural to sit down next to strangers and the students were very friendly, asked us questions”) and the library visits (“the librarians were really nice and helpful. And it was a bit different from what we have at home, well, in depends on a situation, but some librarians are, to put it mildly, less supportive”). Erin, having expected the organizers to have a very academic, serious and theoretical approach to classes, was surprised with the rather informal character of the opening meeting and the warm welcome they received.

6.2. Critical incidents within the Polish group

The last broad category of critical incidents is linked to the Polish group and touches upon such aspects as intragroup interactions, a sense of belonging and group responsibility. Since most of the students appeared to be goal-oriented and approached the assigned tasks with professionalism and commitment, the fact that some students failed to contribute to the final outcome was recognized by two respondents as a negative critical incident:

It was irritating that some of us didn't come to the meetings. I thought it was clear that we had come there to work towards a common goal, that we should support each other, to finish the presentation and make a good impression [Erin].

The respondents' willingness to work towards common goals and to make a good impression was expressed also in other accounts of critical incidents.

Although the recruitment to the IP was voluntary and the respondents did not belong to one student group in the home institution, their recollections suggest that during this two-week stay in Germany they developed a sense of community and appreciated the bond they had with each other: "There was a great moment when some of us had lunch together. It was a moment when we really felt that we were a tight-knit group" [Natalie].

7. Discussion

To recapitulate, the results show that student teachers recalled more examples of positive incidents, most of which happened in contact situations with representatives of other countries. Some critical incidents took place within the Polish group and concerned mainly group coherence and a sense of group responsibility. Having answered the first two research questions, the reference to the last one, "Did the student teachers tend to exhibit ethnocentric or ethnorelative beliefs and behaviors in their choice and interpretation of the critical incidents?", is in order.

Despite offering generally level-headed opinions, one student, Eva, on a few occasions inserted rather judgmental and culture-biased comments in her accounts (e.g., "in the city, or I'd rather call it a small town <smirk>", "we asked a lady, in a scarf, you know"), which situates her in a transitional orientation between minimization and acceptance. It is clear that most of the interviewed student teachers exhibit a worldview characteristic of the acceptance stage – they appear to be aware of intercultural differences and understand that their own cultural context affects different aspects of their lives. Whereas at ethnocentric stages individuals tend to assume a hierarchical view of culture, in which one's own culture is perceived as superior, the participants of the study treat other cultures with respect and hold a realistic view of their homeland. Being aware of some deficiencies and inadequacies encountered on a daily basis, they did not undervalue their country of origin. The participants' willingness to integrate with the co-national group and work towards common goals went hand in hand with their openness to other cultures, curiosity about novelty and interest in students from other national groups. The respondents also appreciated informal multicultural evenings, during which they gained new knowledge about food, drink and traditions typical of other countries. As Mona's earlier comment suggests, she was fully aware that one of the objectives of the LETTA IP was to forge international contacts and gain intercultural skills.

The choice and interpretations of some critical incidents are indicative of the adaptation stage – the student teachers seemed to adapt easily to the course timetable, everyday routines and life on the campus of a German univer-

sity. Irrespective of the configuration of group members' nationalities, they remained respectful to others and displayed goal-oriented and conciliatory attitudes. Cases of unacceptable behaviors were usually analyzed from the perspective of "general culture", which involves cultural norms that are universal and applicable in a wide range of contexts. However, the very same respondents tended to point out to other participants using national labels (e.g., a Turkish girl, German teachers), and even though no disregard or bias were implied, such behavior is symptomatic of their attachment to national/cultural categorization and, therefore, the most advanced orientation of the DMIS model did not take place in these situations.

Out of 6 student teachers only Dena exhibited some characteristics of the integration stage. In her example of exceptionally inspiring group work, she did not pay attention to cultural or national differences between the participants – the main focus was placed on the quality of work and the collaborative spirit she experienced. Similarly, in her evaluation of the German teacher, she condemned the inappropriate and unprofessional behavior, whereas no reference was made to the teacher's nationality. It might have stemmed from Dena's intercultural experience as she had spent a semester in an English-speaking country as an Erasmus student and even today stays in regular contact with individuals from other cultures. To conclude, the accounts and interpretations of both positive and negative critical situations indicate that the respondents display predominantly ethnorelative attitudes, situated for the most part at the acceptance and adaptation stages of DMIS.

These results stand in contrast to some previous findings on mobility experiences in other contexts. Jackson (2011) revealed that although university students became more interculturally sensitive and displayed deeper understanding of cultural differences after a few-week sojourn in England, self-reports prepared on return to the home institution suggested that some participants remained in the ethnocentric phase, and their opinions represented the defense and minimization stages on the DMIS scale. Additionally, as a result of the international experience, some students adopted a critical stance towards Hong Kong, which, unlike before the sojourn, was viewed as inferior in comparison to England.

The friction observed in the group of Polish students offers yet another valuable insight into this international experience. Bodycott and Crew (2000) state that when abroad, co-national student groups typically offer each other support on personal, social and academic levels; however, in some situations an intragroup conflict may occur and lead to a rift and even segregation of some of the group members (Bodycott, 2015). In the present study, the students drifted apart as a result of a "relationship" conflict (cf. Jehn, 1995), which stemmed from differences in perceiving the objectives of the program, the level of engagement and their sense of responsibility.

It is important to underline that both positive and negative cross-cultural encounters affect one's intercultural development and, as Tang and Choi (2004, p. 61) emphasize, "an important aspect of this 'meaning' is the dissonance generated in cross-cultural experiences"; therefore, it can be assumed that experiences reported in the negative critical incidents involving individuals from other cultures may turn valuable and promote future intercultural and, indirectly, professional development. The subject literature points to a close relationship between teachers' international experience and their ability to implement intercultural teaching in their work (Byram, 1991; Göbel & Helmke, 2010; Göbel & Hesse, 2008). However, we cannot assume that a study abroad experience will automatically translate into student teachers' ability to develop IC in prospective learners. A study on student teachers in the same institution (Czura, 2016) evidences that although future teachers were able to provide definitions of IC that were consonant with the definitions available in the literature (Bennet & Bennet, 2004; Byram, 1997), they lacked practical skills necessary to develop this construct in practice. It shows that to turn a study abroad period into a truly education experience with a long-lasting professional impact, teacher training modules need to include both theoretical and practical aspects of developing interculturality in the language classroom.

In closing, it is worth analyzing the applicability of CIT in studies on a short-term international experience. The incidents selected and described by the participants of the present study generated a wealth of valuable qualitative data on their stay in Germany, and it can be concluded that CIT appeared to be a useful data elicitation technique. What is of utmost importance is that the pre-teachers' narratives were not limited to descriptive accounts of the incidents only – they additionally contained evaluation of the situations on the behavioral, affective and cognitive levels. Flanagan (1954, p. 327) underlines that the observations obtained by way of CIT "facilitate solving practical problems"; therefore, it is time to analyze the possible implications of the findings. Since the author and the students had shared their reflections on the IP experience on a few occasions during the IP, most of the reported incidents that related to the classes and school visits did not come as a surprise. However, it was impossible to observe situations that happened in group work and social situations. It appears that casual conversations and the group instructors' interim attempts to solve ongoing problems did not suffice to alleviate the emerging conflicts and there is a need for more formalized support sessions at different stages of a stay abroad period. This observation points to the need for some improvements in the study abroad program. On the one hand, it may be advisable to redefine the role of the instructors to empower them to solve ongoing conflicts; on the other, within-group and between-group interaction can be improved by establishing more precise assessment criteria and more systematic elicitation of outcomes.

8. Conclusions

The present qualitative research study is limited by a relatively small sample, which makes it impossible to form any wide-ranging generalizations about mobility experiences of pre-service teachers in Poland. Still, the results of this study are indicative of the fact that observations and research findings reported in other settings may not be readily applicable in the Polish context. Unlike in other educational systems (Jackson, 2008, 2011; Lee, 2009; Tanaka, 2007), in the present study, the participants of the international program exhibited high levels of intercultural sensitivity and did not report any instances of communicative problems resulting from insufficient language competence. The predominantly ethno-relative orientation, however, did not prevent the students from experiencing culture bumps and intercultural problems, which evidences the need for support programs at different stages of mobility. Decisions about the scope and content of such support programs should be adjusted to the educational context and in this particular case, a more formalized support during the stay abroad period would be of assistance. It is clear that the success of a mobility experience depends on a number of idiosyncratic factors, some of which may be difficult to predict; nevertheless, taking into account the benefits they bring on professional, personal and intercultural levels, mobility programs should be seen as a valuable component of teacher education.

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