



Personal Growth through Critical Incidents in Sports: Exploring alternatives in HE Language Learning

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Abstract:

Social encounters provide opportunities to learn social norms, adopt proper behaviors, and build knowledge and skills. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) play a key role in socialization for the young within and beyond them. Students interact with their classmates and teachers in school, meet new colleagues at work, build and strengthen friendships in their free time, which enriches their chances for personal growth. Sport is one such pursuit that facilitates interaction. This text explores sport's potential to develop HEI students' foreign language and professional skills contributing to their personal growth.

This study is part of a project conducted at a private university specializing in economic, management and business administration between 2016 and 2022 with Master's degree students studying Business English. The Critical Incident Technique (CIT) was used to collect data in the form of written narratives analyzing varied memorable moments from the students' interactions in English experienced during the course of their lives locally or abroad. 238 student analyses of CIs from diverse social situations and settings were collected and examined using a thematic analysis. Corresponding categories of the most significant agents of socialization creating valuable foreign language learning opportunities were identified. Of these, 6 % covered CIs from the context of sports. The data show that engaging in sporting activities not only contributes to students' personal growth but also helps them build a professional skill set, including foreign language skills, crucial for succeeding in their academic and professional paths. Relevant recommendations for integrating sports in the HEIs programs, teaching, international cooperation and variety of extracurricular activities are provided.

ABSTRAKT:

Člověk se učí společenským normám, kultivuje své chování a získává klíčové znalosti i dovednosti prostřednictvím socializace. Prostředí terciálního vzdělávání a na něj navázané společenské sítě hrají v procesu socializace klíčovou roli. Studenti interagují se svými spolužáky a učiteli při studiu, spolupracují s kolegy na pracovišti, budují a posilují přátelství ve svém volném čase, což vytváří příležitosti pro jejich osobní růst. Data představená v tomto textu naznačují, že jednou z významných socializačních příležitostí u mladých studujících jsou také sportovní aktivity. Studie zkoumá potenciál sportování při rozvoji jazykových, komunikačních i měkkých dovedností u studentů vysokých škol.

Pro účely tematické analýzy jsou využita svědectví studentů sdílená ve formě písemných narrative zaměřených na tzv. kritické události, které se v průběhu jejich životů odehrály při sportovních aktivitách v kontextu užívání cizích jazyků. Data ukazují, že zapojení do extrakurikulárních sportovních aktivit přispívá nejen k osobnímu růstu studentů, ale významně rozvíjí i široký soubor profesních dovedností, včetně jazykových a interkulturních kompetencí, klíčových pro úspěch v jejich akademické a následně profesní dráze. V závěru textu jsou popsána doporučení pro integraci sportovních aktivit jako nedílné součásti programů terciálního vzdělávání, včetně iniciativ mezinárodní spolupráce a internacionalizace.

KEY WORDS / KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

critical incidents, thematic analysis, agent of socialization, sport, personal development, higher education institution

kritický incident, tematická analýza, socializace, sport, osobní rozvoj, vysokoškolské vzdělávání

**1 THE PROCESS OF SOCIALIZATION**

“No one — not rock stars, not professional athletes, not software billionaires, and not even geniuses — ever makes it alone” (Gladwell, 2009). Indeed, humans as social creatures lead closely intertwined lives. From childhood, people acquire basic social principles and norms and build a range of knowledge and skills through social encounters.

Ever since Piaget (1954) and Erikson (1963), the process of socialization has been viewed from various perspectives, e.g. as a process of transmitting culture to future generations, as the source of inequality or as a channel to communicate messages in social interaction (Little, 2013; Setterson, 2002). Generally, socialization is viewed as an avenue to personal and professional growth. During social contact, people communicate their needs and expectations, test their beliefs, form their values and thus construct their personality and character. People also learn through sharing knowledge and skills and gain unique experiences, which helps them communicate better throughout their lives to realize their ideas, needs and wishes.

People interact within varied agents of socialization (Little, 2013). Primarily, socialization begins within the family, which represents the most stable unit during a person’s life. The family is soon complemented by peer groups that form through personal similarities and shared interests, which build up with time spent within institutional agents later in life, such as educational institutions, free time facilities and the workplace. Religious groups, governmental institutions, and mass media further add to the basic mix of social interactions that contribute to learning civic roles and principles.

1.1 HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS (HEIS) AS AGENTS OF SOCIALIZATION

Tertiary education represents a potent agent of socialization in early adulthood. HEIs are an important gateway to extended opportunities for socialization beyond study or work-related contexts (Jognsma, 2016; OECD, 2020) as they open doors for interactional opportunities in local and international contexts. In their educational strategies, schools develop curricula corresponding to societal demands, create conditions and provide services supporting students in their academic needs to help them with “tackling future skills mismatches and promoting excellence in skills development” (European Commission, 2017). Outside the classroom, HEIs continue to shape how students socialize, whether through informal interactions with classmates or within the many clubs and societies that characterize tertiary education as much as lectures, assignments and exams. Sports clubs have long been one of the most popular and most firmly rooted extracurricular activities in HEIs and, as this paper will argue,



these activities, while undoubtedly contributing to the students' health, also shape core competencies, including communication and foreign language skills, increasing the students' chances of success in their personal endeavors and professional paths.

1.2 SPORTS AS AGENTS OF SOCIALIZATION

Sports could be divided into two broad categories: individual or team. While in team sports, the ability or willingness to cooperate takes priority over individual excellence, since individuals rely on each other, individual sports aim at improving individual performance through discipline and focus. Individual sports, nonetheless, also assume interaction. Because they take place in a community of teammates while training or rivals while competing, they are subject to rules, principles and team dynamics. Therefore, whether individual or collective, sports "help create a social identity" of individuals "who have at least one shared interest", and thus promote healthy peer relationships among the young (Rosewater, 2009, p. 1). In addition, and precisely because of this, sports demonstrably "promote peer learning through group or team activities, including team decision-making" (*ibid.*, p. 12).

The benefits of sport-influenced social interaction presuppose a particular conception of society. From a liberal, humanistic perspective, it socializes people to be healthy individuals, to care for themselves and not partake in pathological behaviors, such as drinking, smoking, or drug use (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005). In the same way, sport can influence people's perception of gender norms. For example, sport helps girls form a stronger identity (Murray et al., 2022) and learn to express "nontraditional gender roles" (Miller et. al, 2002), which opens a gateway for equal opportunities that help them break gender stereotypes, especially the imaginary glass ceiling by "enhancing their sense of possibility" (Rosewater, 2009, p. 1). Without disregarding these aforementioned perspectives, sports also elucidate certain pedagogical relations and thus enhance the chances for academic success (Crosnoe, 2002; Trudeau & Shephard, 2008) as they build "a gateway to academic achievement, better grades, improved chances of attending college, and success in the labor market" (Rosewater, 2009, p. 1). Sports also yield a variety of plurilingual communicative situations anticipating foreign language knowledge and a set of communication and soft-skills. This article, therefore, focuses on the role of sports in the context of HE and proposes that sports can make an essential contribution to building a complex set of key skills, competencies and qualities leading to the students' academic and professional success.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study is based on critical incidents (CIs) defined as memorable moments of realization in a person's life that are "sufficiently complete in [themselves] to permit inferences and predictions", "leave little doubt concerning [their] effects" (Flanagan, 1954, p. 1), but "allow for a wide range of possible interpretations" (Sieglová et al., 2022, p. 235). No matter if the incident is critical in a positive or negative sense, CIs trigger the ability to interpret human activity, make decisions and take actions, and



as such mold future behavior or actions of their participants. Similarly to the way CIs were explored in numerous other fields, such as psychology, medicine, pedagogy, intercultural studies, or business (Apedaile & Schill, 2008; Butterfield et al., 2005; Cope & Watts, 2000; FitzGerald et al., 2008; Flanagan, 1954; Sieglová et al., 2023; Spencer-Oatey & Davidson, 2013; Tripp, 1993; Wight, 1995), this study examines CIs in the context of sport proposing that sports can generate emotionally intensive CIs in a variety of contexts and skills learned through these lessons are transferrable to study and professional contexts.

The Critical Incident Technique (CIT), adjusted for this study to collect, analyze and interpret HEIs' student CIs, was first described by Flanagan (1954) as a tool for "solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles" (*ibid.*, p. 1) in varied specializations. Starting in aviation psychology programs, the technique was then applied in health sciences or medical fields (FitzGerald et al., 2008) to foster unpredictable behaviors of patients so they could be better "measured, predicted, and ultimately controlled" (Butterfield et al., 2005, p. 482). The CIT proved useful in intercultural studies, too, as it is able to increase "awareness and understanding of human attitudes, expectations, behaviors, and interactions" in an international dialogue (Apedaile & Schill, 2008; Butterfield et al., 2005; Spencer-Oatey & Davidson, 2013). Data collected through the CIT take the form of written narratives that can be a part of questionnaires, or they can be obtained from oral interviews, focus groups, or life interactions in the form of audio or audio-visual data.

2.1 SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

The CIs as written narratives used in this study are part of a longitudinal study conducted between 2017 and 2023 at a private HEI specializing in economic, management and business administration. In their Master's degree business English lessons addressing management, motivation and intercultural issues, students had to submit written narrations in English describing CIs they faced in various international settings during their lives when foreign languages were used. Their testimonies described situations significant to them adopting the 3RA tool (report — reflect — re-evaluate — act), as described by Spencer-Oatey and Davidson (2013, p. 1), setting an outline to first describe the critical moment, including the participants, setting and scene in which it took place (Report), then account for the first-hand reflections, including emotions, interpretations and moves (Reflect), and finally, discuss postponed interpretations and realizations of their own roles and learning (Reevaluate) and how these reflected in their future decisions, behaviors and actions (Act). This format, then, reflects the critical incident cycle (Sieglová, 2023) in each CI, allowing us to see the learning process behind the CIs as a series of momentary spontaneous emotional, cognitive and behavioral reactions followed by conscious metacognitive and meta-behavioral processing.

A thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Tuckett, 2005) was adopted to code, organize, classify, categorize and analyze the data from the perspective of content and related settings for the purpose of identifying principal themes, drawing interpretations and suggesting practical implications.



2.2 CRITICAL INCIDENTS BY AGENTS OF SOCIALIZATION

Figure 1 below shows the proportion of all the CIs by agents of socialization for the data set gathered. Sports as agents of socialization covered 6% of the 238 CIs from the data set, complementing CIs happening at work (31%), in school (27%), during travelling (20%) or socializing (11%), which indicates their importance in a student's life.

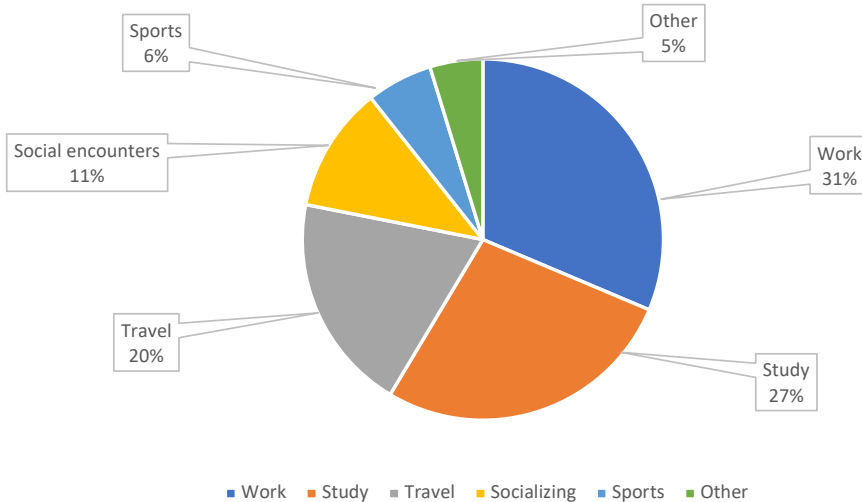


FIGURE 1: Critical incidents by agents of socialization.

3 THEMES

6% of the entire dataset comprising of only 14 CIs in sports may seem insignificant, but seen from the perspective of a single agent of socialization, the material suggests extensive results. The data analyzed below demonstrate that students engaging in sports not only benefit in physical or psychological terms, but also develop key skills, competencies, values and principles, including language and communication skills, allowing them to function and succeed in the globalized world.

In the following section, seven incidents have been selected for analysis, each divided into two parts to be analyzed separately. First, the critical part is introduced representing the reactive phase when interpretations get processed, meanings are sought, first-hand decisions and actions are projected. Second, the student reflections on the following courses of actions and their evaluations are examined and further analyzed, pointing out the emerging themes and commenting on the obvious learning processes in wider contexts. For the sake of authenticity, the narrations were left in their original English. Minimal interventions into the students' language, e.g., correcting minor grammar issues not impeding the content or omitting redundant information, were undertaken to make the text easier to follow for the reader.

3.1 CRITICAL INCIDENT 1

Problem-solving

The data indicate that sports settings generate highly formative experiences with a memorable critical force. This can be demonstrated through the first CI from bodybuilding:

“It was when I started with bodybuilding. This sport completely changed my life, for that I didn’t regret. Bodybuilding completely taught me what is hard work, dedication, believe in myself and be myself. The final satisfaction went after 6 years at 16 in Cecina Mare — Italy. This was an organizing center of the World bodybuilding championship NABBA. I was there with my loved father. It was Friday — the day of the weighing. It was a warm summer day and I woke up to a cold room where we were accommodated. I went on weighing-machine and found out that I have 3 kg more than is my weight limit for competition.”

This situation qualifies as a critical moment carrying a forceful meaning for the student’s life as it made him analyze the situation, evaluate consequences, weigh available options, make quick decisions and plan an action. The whole series of events, then, assumes the development of key competencies for success, which becomes evident from the student’s following steps.

First and foremost, the situation required a prompt reaction to make quick decisions based on swift problem-solving because, as the student pointed out, he had a few hours until the final weighing in the afternoon:

“I called my coach and he told me: ‘take warm clothes and go to walk’. So I went out with my headphones, two sweatshirts, many t-shirts and tracksuit. After two hours, I started to feel a little tired, I came back and stand again on weighing-machine, but my weight was still the same and time went because at 3 pm I had been on main representation meeting... I call my coach again and there was only one possible choice — go to sauna. It could be around 10 o’clock so I fastly search on my phone if there is some wellness in the city and I found one next to border of the city. We sat to the car and my father took me there... I ran to reception and described them my situation, that I am bodybuilding competitor. They gave me all services free and took care about me than I had never seen before in my country.”

As described in the reflexive analysis, several steps were taken while considering available options. The student sought advice from an experienced person — his coach. After the first attempt failed, the student took his further advice and, with the help of his father, found a quick transport solution. Needless to say, besides dedication, the following were all key factors contributing to solving the problem: a high degree of creativity and flexibility when exploring options, respect for authorities when following guidelines and accepting help, as well as efficient foreign and (inter-cultural) communication skills with the wellness center staff who fully accommodated his needs with full services.





Perseverance

The student's dedication to an established goal is obvious not only from the discomfort he was willing to endure while wearing multiple layers of warm clothing on a summer day, but also from the time he spent in sauna:

“The hell started in this moment because I wasn't allowed to drink anything. I started the uncountable rounds of staying in sauna and short-term cooling down. Everything was acceptable until I spent there over two hours and I felt that this is some critical point between thirsty and reducing my weight. Because I had a weighing-machine with me I could control, the trend of decrease were about 0.5 kg per half hour. After second hour there every minute was harder and harder... The time played against me because I couldn't lengthen the pauses and I wasn't feeling good. In my mind was fight inside, one part of me would stop that and opposite my endurance told me than I couldn't stop.”

At this moment, the student, dedicated to his goal, employed several personal qualities to endure the physically as well emotionally strenuous efforts, including trust in his coach's advice, hope and belief in success, focus on the set-up target and a great deal of perseverance and will-power not to drop, which all are necessary prerequisites for achievement.

Meaning

To fortify his endurance in the sauna, the student searched for significance, and to justify his efforts, he sought meaning, recalling important past moments:

“All preparation, all competition overplay in my head, that some people at my beginning told me ‘you never have been bodybuilder’. I thought also of my father and the moment when my parents divorced, I think of loved people, my great-grandmothers which rest in peace in heaven now, all this bad and good things played in my head and I couldn't stop. One and a half hour later, weighing-machine shows exactly the number which I need.”

This section of the student's reflexive testimony indicates what he found as crucial moments in forming his values and attitudes. He remembered the time devoted to hard training. He recalled early discouragement from skeptics about his capabilities, which encouraged him to pursue his goal. He realized what family meant to him, while referring to his father, parents, and his great-grandmothers. He also recalled things he lost in life, mentioning his parents' divorce or his great-grandmother's death. All these thoughts gave him meaning that kept him going to reach the desired result.

Accomplishment

Finally, his efforts paid off:

“After we sprinted to the meeting and the next day, I won my first bodybuilding world title in my life when the broadcaster said my name as last. In this moment I couldn't believe it and after that seeing pride in my father's eyes was the best satisfaction that

I experienced to this time. Later of course it was overcharged by the graduation on university and the last this year the European title.”



This part of the incident shows that sports, competitions and related achievements allowed the student to experience strong moments of accomplishment and satisfaction, which is transferable to academic and professional contexts. He not only won the competition on that particular day but also, by comparing this achievement to his later graduation or winning the European title, indicated that his victory gave him direction, discipline and sense in his further life efforts beyond sports.

What is more, relating the outcome to the student’s introductory note from the first section of the testimony — *“bodybuilding completely taught me what is a hard work, dedication, belief in myself and to be myself”* —, it also becomes obvious that he realized that achievements are a result of personal traits, such as deliberate and persistent effort, strict discipline, mental toughness, self-confidence, direction, and willingness to leave one’s comfort zone.

To sum up, this CI accentuates the role of individual sports on developing crucial skills for personal achievement, such as endurance, self-discipline and focus. The student on his journey toward a self-set goal tested his limits and willingness to risk and accept discomfort, learned to problem-solve and fortified his willpower. This incident, at the same time, highlights the role of sports, regardless of whether they are individual or collective, in enhancing cooperation skills and teamwork. The student on his journey to individual success in bodybuilding still needed to work within a normative system of a larger social network. In this sense, he acted as a team player by accepting guidance from his coach or help from his father, and he followed rules set by the sport, required by the event committee and valid to all of his competitors.

3.2 CRITICAL INCIDENT 2

Shared responsibility

The role of cooperation skills and their enhancement in sports can best be demonstrated in team sports, as they require suppressing individual ambitions in favor of shared goals. This assumes the ability to accept one’s own degree of responsibility, as illustrated through an incident that took place in Krasnodar, Russia, this particular student’s hometown:

“When I was about 14 years old, I was preparing with my team for rhythmic gymnastics competition. Two days before I decided to relax with my friends and I neglected the health food rules we were following as gymnasts for 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The next day I got a big food poisoning, high temperature and I was really bad. At the time, we had to move I became worse and we missed the competition.”

In this incident, the student, as evident in her testimony, faced a situation that made her fully realize the difference between following individual desires and the collective good, and its consequences for both the team and herself. Upon neglecting dietary discipline and losing the competition for the whole team, she learned the



meaning of shared responsibility as a valuable skill transferrable to other professional environments. Her following reflective account shows that thanks to this incident, she got through a realization which led to changed attitudes and behaviors beyond this incident. First, she assessed taking conscious risks as a carefree attitude: *“I thought: There are a lot of dangerous things that are able to happen but nothing will happen now and nothing will happen with me”*. Then, she got through self-criticism by accepting individual responsibility for the team failure: *“I let my team down and because of me our team missed the competition that was very important for us”*. As a result, she was also able to define proper corrective behavior: *“I did have to refuse unhealthy food, be more careful about myself and be more responsible, because I am not the only one in the team”*. This, finally, led her to apply the general principles of shared responsibility in teamwork in her future actions:

“This incident made me to understand the responsibility I always have when I work in a team. If I have an important event in a few days, I start to analyze how I should be prepared, what could help me and what things could hurt my team, my health or preparing. Also, I evaluate risks that could happen during my preparation, when I want to do something only by myself. Now it is really important for me to know possible consequences.”

This reflexive part of the incident shows the student adopting crucial skills for team cooperation that are applicable beyond team sports and which the student can later implement in professional contexts.

3.3 CRITICAL INCIDENT 3

Business skills

The next CI taking place in the context of martial arts shows that sports teach further skills widely applicable in business, such as the principles of competition:

“My karate team and I went to Japan to participate in world championship. Even though I was 12 years old, I noticed every detail of culture. I was struck by their purity, diligence and discipline. Before the competition started, we trained together with the Japanese kids. They were very friendly and positive. And then came the day of the competition where I won first two fights and reached the semi-finals and my opponent was a Japanese kid with whom we trained together. It’s always been hard for me to fight against friends. The battle began, I couldn’t hit hard but my opponent fought like he thought that I was his main enemy, as a result, I lost the fight.”

While relating genuine feelings toward his teammates, the student was obviously struck by his friend’s transformation into an authentic rival during the competition. This situation, however, helped him learn another valuable skill transferable to professional practice. This is obvious from the following reflexive account describing follow-up advice provided to him by the Japanese coach:



“After the fight, I was approached by the Japanese coach who said the words that changed my thinking. He said, ‘when sounds the signal that starts the fight, you have to win and when the fight is over you should remain friends and respect each other’.”

First, the student received a lesson about the difference between a friend and a rival in sports. This meant learning to respect a friend’s right to win, thus prioritizing his ambitions over companionship. Translated into professional contexts, he learned how to separate personal from professional relationships. From a wider perspective, the student learned how to maintain functional professional cooperation in competitive environments.

In addition, by reflecting on a contrasting approach of two authorities as role models — the Japanese coach and his own coach, the student received a chance to recognize varied working styles across cultures, which he mentioned in the continued reflection:

“Our coach taught us that we are brothers and shouldn’t hit each other too hard, but the Japanese coach taught that they are competitors and they have to do everything to win. I had to choose between a friend and a rival. To win or keep the friendship. To win or lose. Now I know that in business you need to be persistent and be able to strike first.”

From the perspective of working styles, the student realized the difference between people- and result-oriented approaches of the two coaches. He, at the same time, decided what suits him the best not only in the narrow perspective of the sport but also in a wider perspective of a professional environment. What is more, experiencing sports in an international context, including varied approaches to teammates, rivals and competition, helped him develop valuable intercultural skills for doing business on a global scale.

3.4 CRITICAL INCIDENT 4

Manner and diplomacy

Sports yield other CIs which contribute to maturing the students’ further professional principles, such as separating personal judgements from fair-play in sports. This can be demonstrated through an incident taking place at the opening ceremony of a majorette international competition, when a student, while waiting in a parade of all the competing teams, jurors and organizers, talked offensively about one of the jurors in a personal chat with her teammate:

“The start is an introduction where whole teams are placed side by side, jurors, teams and the national anthem are introduced. Usually, it’s long and strenuous because everyone is nervous before the competition. The majorettes talk to each other and I remember that there was an organizer in front of each team. I remember that my friend and I had a terrible slander side by side about a juror who was very strict and once gave me very few points in solo choreography. When the jurors introduced themselves, the lady in front of us raised her hand and started waving. It turned out to be exactly the juror I didn’t talk about nicely and she certainly heard us.”



In this incident, the student was confronted with the consequences of inappropriate behavior — talking during the national anthem ceremony and speaking offensively about an authority figure. What is more, she semi-publicly impugned the objectivity of a professional judge. Although the impact of this incident on the juror's future decisions is not clear, as it cannot be proven if the lady really heard the girls talking or not, the follow-up course of events shows that this incident led the student to re-evaluate her own actions.

“We advanced to the semifinals, but we got a lot of points from this lady. I was very sorry, because in the end she was very nice. Since then, I’ve been paying attention to what I’m saying, where I’m saying it, and most importantly, I’m no longer talking about people badly. It taught me a lot, the jury may be kind, but at the same time he must have some respect.”

Based on the reflection, the student obviously learned the principles of proper manners, diplomacy, objectivity, and fair-play. First, by receiving a good evaluation from a judge whom she accused of lacking objectivity earlier in the competition, the student realized the dubiousness of single, subjective judgements about people. Second, she recognized the inappropriateness of their behavior in the context of a formal ceremony, being surrounded by a crowd of mostly unknown people including professionals from various fields. Finally, she received a lesson in discretion and professional behavior. Participating in sports competitions, therefore, teaches students in discipline and respect applicable to wider professional settings.

3.5 CRITICAL INCIDENT 5

Self-confidence

As indicated in some of the earlier incidents, accomplishments reached through sports foster the students' self-confidence, which can be best demonstrated through one student's exchange trip to the USA where he joined an American football team as one of the mandatory subjects:

“Although I had no knowledge of American football and such a poor level of English when I came in the U.S., being a part of real American football team had become one of my biggest experiences in my entire life. I still colorfully remember my first practice when I had been only for 3 days in the U.S. That day I experienced a real hell. I ended up in completely new environment and absolutely had no idea what to do. Moreover, I received a thousand of protectors which I did not know how to use. And of course, my new teammates made fun of me.”

Joining the American football team clearly placed the student in discomfort and stress at the beginning, evoking initial uncertainties. Having no experience with the sport itself, including the use of related equipment, fortified by language barriers and social pressures, pushed the student beyond his comfort zone. He, nonetheless, worked himself through the course to the final match of the season, which,

according to his reflexive account, brought him strong feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction:

“I also experienced Senior night which occurred at the last match of the season. The crucial moment occurred at the moment of the last whistle and the end of the match. Last whistle meant the end of our season and farewell... Nobody except the ones who had experienced it can imagine what happened right after the last whistle. All the stadium was flooded with euphoria of victory. Immediately after that the whole stadium fell silent and everyone realized it was over. This was definitely one of the toughest times in my life and my blood literally stiffened in my veins.”

Strong emotions described as euphoria at the game’s end enabled the student to experience collective satisfaction. The key critical moment breeding feelings of strong individual satisfaction, however, happened in the following course of events when he was approached by his coach after the game:

“What’s worse, one of the head coaches came to me and thanked me for all season and my contribution of team success even though I was only one foreigner in the team. As the symbol of the honesty, I received the book with personal thanks.”

In the following reflexive account, the student acknowledged his achievements during the season abroad. It occurred to him that he not only proved to be able to overcome the linguistic and social challenges and successfully integrated into the team, but also succeeded in learning and being a positive contribution in terms of the sport itself:

“Despite the crucial initial situations, in meantime, I overcame all the obstacles and became a full member of the team. In this context, I would say that I became a member of the family because we were as the family for whole season. This incident was very demanding for me because I realized that I was able to integrate into completely different society within one year and go through the whole season of American football which I had never played before.”

Obviously, being able to successfully overcome hardships had a positive impact on the student’s self-confidence and self-esteem. He tested his own capabilities applicable in his future carrier. And he became fully aware of the drill he received which set a good foundation for his professional practice expressed in his concluding remark:

“Since that time, I feel more comfortable in a new environment and do not have problems to integrate. This ability is helping me when I discover new positions and departments in the company I work for.”

In summary, getting through hardships seems to expand the boundaries of an individual’s comfort zone, which is a prerequisite for personal growth. As the student points out, overcoming the initial uncertainties in a new, unknown situation prepared him for tackling similar situations in his future jobs with greater confidence.





3.6 CRITICAL INCIDENT 6

Direction

Besides boosting self-confidence and realizing the student's own aptitudes, as illustrated in the previous situation, the following CI shows that sport activities produce challenging situations testing participants' aptitudes or talents:

“The first moment that influenced my life and I found out about myself which personality in the future I am going to be, was when I was 11 years old. There was a football tournament for players under 14 and our team played the final. The score was 1:1 at 60 minutes. We got a big chance, because we had a penalty. None of my teammates had the courage to take the ball and go shoot.”

As described in this testimony, the student faced a chance to test and show his abilities by taking over the responsibility for the whole team. This required a great deal of confidence about his skills as well as a desire to excel. This situation, however, also included a great risk of failure, specifically public failure, as the potential setback would not only be witnessed by teammates and coaches, but also by the audience in the stadium. The student, nonetheless, decided to take the risk:

“Even though I was the youngest, I found the courage in me. I changed the penalty. This moment meant two things to me. First, I want to be the leader, the one who takes responsibility for himself. And the second, that I like when my attention is on me and I'm under pressure.”

This move indicated the student's personality traits and potential for the future. Certainly, it required a great deal of courage, but the student translated it as a unique chance for himself to demonstrate his qualities, which he usually did not get easily as the youngest member of the team. And, as he himself admitted, this was the moment when his leadership desires outweighed his fear of failure. He took advantage of the chance to overcome his age disadvantage within the team, proving emotional strength over his teammates as well as an ability to focus and perform despite numerous pressures — public exposure, potential loss, and personal failure.

What is more, this experience gave the student a chance to realize many important individual skills for his future life and career. First, he recognized his own leadership skills and desires. He also proved to himself a willingness and ability to take risks and responsibility over the whole team, and both focus and deliver results under pressure, which is a great asset when choosing his future direction.

3.7 CRITICAL INCIDENT 7

Principles and fair play

Sports work under specific formal and informal rules which teach the students discipline, respect for rules and a sense of fair play and justice, as demonstrated in a situation from shooting. At sixteen, based on the results from the whole-year competition



series, the student qualified for the European Championship in the category Air Rifle Junior as one of three representatives per country. The final nomination of the representing athletes, however, is usually not set only by the whole season results. Sport authorities also consider the athletes' up-to-date condition when selecting the national team. Two hours before the last qualification competition, the student, even though she was leading the qualification series based on points, learned that the result of the upcoming contest will decide between her and another up-and-coming competitor in the age category for the championship team. *"I was shocked! How is it possible, I asked myself. All season, I had better results than she had."* she wrote, further explaining her indignation. She not only judged the decision as unfair, but also objected to the way she was informed about the specification of the qualification criteria: *"The other shooter had all week for preparation because she already knew it."*

Despite her anger, the decision she had to make put her at a crossroads, having to choose between proving her qualities through competing and winning the upcoming qualifying competition, fighting for her rights through argumentation with the authorities, or quitting the game in protest. As shown below, she decided to fight for herself, as she conformed to the authority decision and put maximum focus on the upcoming game. Nonetheless, to no avail, she lost to her competitor in the final:

"I do not remember how I could that day shoot one of my best results even with extremely shaking body. However, nothing was decided because she shot exactly the same result. So, on Sunday there was the last chance. I felt so much stress. But I was worse than she only about two points. I was devastated."

Although it is impossible to measure the role of the student's emotional pressure on her result, her testimony indicates that she felt affected by intense stress and carried the feelings of injustice long after. Two later discoveries affirmed her frustration. Though it was based on a word-of-mouth, she learned about another possible reason why the other shooter received priority:

"A few months later I found why I competed with her for Championship. She was from better club than I was. And the club got money for every shooter who attends the Championships. And for many people this was likely why I stayed at home. I cried all week and felt helpless."

Her disappointment was further reinforced in a later conversation with one of her coaches, who expressed her sympathy for how the two shooting competitors were informed about the qualification criteria: *"In the end he apologized to me and he admitted that I should have had more time for an elaboration of the information."*

In sum, the course of events led the student to presume a lack of transparency in sports. Objective reasons for changing the qualification criteria for the international representation might have, indeed, not been clearly explained to her, which possibly added to the subjective interpretations that colored her reflection. It is, however, important to reiterate that standard international competition nomination criteria in sports generally include criteria besides ranking results. This reality might not have



been objectively acknowledged by the student because of her emotions. And as the final competition between the two girls had shown, the other competitor, indeed, had better results and the ability to withstand pressure momentarily, which was a fully legitimate reason for the adjustment of the nomination criteria. It is therefore important to treat the student's interpretations as a subjective perspective of someone who lost the game rather than as an evidence of corruption in sports.

Based on the student's follow-up reflection, this situation, however, had a positive effect on her maturity and personal growth in many areas. First, she developed compassion: *"After this experience I learned how it works in this sport. I was not the only one who had to go through similar situation. When I see someone in tears after bad competition, I always remember this incident."* Second, it made her clarify her priorities and make confident decisions in the future: *"This incident changed me a lot. Firstly, I changed the club, because I did not want a more coach who said nothing to my defense."* Third, she started building networks based on values and trust: *"This situation had also influence on my relationships with other shooters and coaches. I did not want listen someone whom I did not trust."* Fourth, she went through the process of self-reflection and contemplated her own mistakes or overreactions in the incident: *"Also, I had conversation with coach who told me before competition about the fact that it was between me and Monica. And I have to confess I was not nice to him."* Finally, this situation also gave her some direction for the future: *"But the biggest change happened when I went to university, because I realized that shooting is not most important, so I started to train children and finally when I want to go on competition, I am going without stress."*

This incident is an example of how students build values and a sense of fair-play through experiencing intense moments of frustration, injustice, or failure. Such situations help the students to orient themselves in varied social contexts and build their own value systems by learning to exercise humility, accept failure, control their emotions, and respect authorities and their opponents.

4 CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR HEIS

This study demonstrates that in the guise of enjoyment for participants or entertainment for the audiences, sports help students develop qualities and skills that contribute to their personal and professional growth significantly. Sports, therefore, should be an integral part of HEIs practices for the following reasons.

Recalling the context in which this study was conducted, sports are well-suited for language learning. First, sporting activities unite people internationally, and thus yield numerous plurilingual opportunities motivating the students to learn and speak foreign languages. Second, as a result, sports create wider social networks that further multiply communication opportunities. Third, sports generate a plethora of communication situations helping to develop key foreign language, communication and intercultural competencies.

Relatedly, CIs occurring in the context of sports, as shown in this text, can serve as a natural linguistic resource for varied activities in lessons, helping students to develop contextualized formal as well as functional language skills in practice, including

general vocabulary, topic related terminology, relevant grammar structures, or pragmatic functions. As such, sports contribute to building situation-based, personalized, and thus more efficient sets of linguistic repertoire, yielding the desired learning outcomes. Sports, therefore, create an ideal context for the Content and Language Integrated Learning approach (Marsh, 1994; Morgado et al., 2015), which cultivates a motivated and autonomous language learner.

Sports, nonetheless, also develop a wider set of important soft skills crucial for efficient communication and dialogue, which are transferable to professional settings, for example, strategy making, problem solving, cooperation, or interpersonal skills. Given their inherently competitive and playful character, sports teach the principles of working together. They teach responsibility for the team based on a willingness to prioritize common goals over self-interests. They teach cooperation, discipline, respect, and compassion for teammates or other competitors, as well as respect for the authorities who supervise, evaluate performance, and ensure abidance to rules. For the same reason, sports strengthen personal ties and allow students to learn from role models that they meet, play with, compete with, or achieve leadership from. As a source of entertainment to wider audiences, sports help to tackle the challenges of performing for crowds. Through sports, students eliminate stage fright or stress, enforce concentration and focus on the one hand, and experience the feeling of glory on the other.

At the same time, sports foster intrapersonal skills which are a prerequisite for individual achievements such as dedication, self-discipline, or focus, and strengthen perseverance leading to individual excellence. By facing hardships and failures, students withstand discomfort, take risks and step out of their comfort-zones. Later, they see the results of systematic training, practice and competitions invaluable in the area of language learning. They also recognize their own aptitudes, which boosts their self-confidence and self-esteem, important assets for internal motivation. Sports also teach students how to win or lose and the principles of fair play. Thus, CIs experienced through sports contribute to building value systems and personal integrity. In the context of sports, then, students better see meaning in their academic endeavors, set up priorities and direct their future carriers.

Sports inherently overlap with the students' school activities and social encounters. HEIs, therefore, should play a central role in providing wider opportunities to engage in sports. Besides encouraging students to seek international experience and build international relationships which, as shown in this text, spontaneously leads the students to engage in varied sports activities, sports should also be fully integrated in the HEIs' study programs, for example in the form of university sport clubs, institutionally organized games or competitions, sport-oriented team building, charity events, partnerships with local sporting organizations and the like. Students can also be motivated to co-organize the school's initiatives to foster bonds not only among the students themselves, but also with their teachers and institutional staff. All this could motivate them to engage in sports of their own choice. Needless to say, sports events involving international students or organized in cooperation with international partners add a language dimension.

Last but not least, this study also shows the didactic potential of CIs. As model case studies in the form of experiential learning or training materials, such as exercises,





role plays, or simulation games, selected CIs can be integrated into a variety of subjects ranging from context-based language education to business and human resource management or other social sciences. As shown above, each incident contains a critical moment open to not only drawing interpretations, making immediate decisions, and taking subsequent actions, but also reflecting on them and better controlling one's own behavior in the future. These critical moments, as well as the follow-up students' reflexive accounts, can therefore become subject training and group analytical activities aimed at problem-solving, strategy-making, conflict-resolution, negotiation, or communication schemas that can help the students acquire the necessary skill-set for their future careers.

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