
SECTION 5: META-COMMUNICATION

Culture-bound assumptions, values and expectations are often the unrecognised causes of misunderstandings in intercultural encounters. At the same time, we rarely meet a culture as such, but more often one or more particular individuals from a culture, who may or may not be representative of the stereotypes we hold of their culture. Knowledge of different culture types and their characteristics will therefore not answer all the questions which may arise in intercultural encounters. Being able to address these questions and to find common ground, i.e. to negotiate a common understanding of what is involved, is also necessary to resolve problems which may arise. Meta-communication (i. e. communication about communication) and meta-communicative strategies play an important part in this, and it is these strategies which are the focus of this section.

It is not necessary that learners know the term *meta-communication*, but only that they know how to use the strategies. For this reason the word itself has been avoided in the worksheets.

Two pages (113 f.) provide learners with useful phrases.

Page	Title	Aim	Communication / Language	Level
113	WHAT I MEAN IS ...	Reference sheet	Introducing language for meta-communication	1 & 2
114	DESCRIBING EXPERIENCES, OBSERVATIONS, IMPRESSIONS	Reference sheet	Introducing language for meta-communication	1 & 2
115	WHAT DO YOU MEAN?	Avoiding and clearing up misunderstandings	Asking, clarifying	1 & 2
117	FINDING COMMON GROUND	Establishing mutual understanding	Asking for details, explaining	1 & 2
119	WHAT DO YOU SAY?	Dealing with difficult situations	Explaining, clarifying, reaching mutual understanding	1 & 2

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WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

It is not always easy to understand what people mean even if we are all speaking English. What would you ask if you don't know what someone means?

It is usually not a good idea to ask "What do you mean?"!

A. You are working in an international team.
What questions would you have in the following situations?
What would you ask or say?

1. During a meeting, an English team member says to you "It's rather hot in here, isn't it?"
2. You meet some new team members from different countries. One says "Hello, my name is Zoltan".
3. Your team leader is Polish. He says "I wonder if you could do this by Monday?" when he gives you a task to do.
4. When he is discussing some work with you, a British team member says "I'm not really very happy about this layout. How do you feel about changing it?"
5. You suggest having a barbecue together one weekend. Some of the team members do not seem very interested in the idea.



B. You give presentations in different countries.
What questions would you have in the following situations?
What would you ask or say?

1. Although you invite questions during your presentation and leave time for questions at the end, no-one asks any.
2. There are several people who look very bored during your presentation and some even seem to be asleep.
3. You are not sure whether to start or if someone is going to introduce you.
4. One person interrupts you all the time during your presentation with questions which you want to answer at the end.
5. A plate of food is placed near you when you begin your presentation.



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WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

TRAINER'S NOTES

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It is not always easy to understand what people mean even if we are all speaking English. What would you ask if you don't know what someone means? It is usually not a good idea to ask: "What do you mean?"

You are working in an international team. What questions would you have in the following situations? What would you ask or say?

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You give presentations in different countries. What questions would you have in the following situations? What would you ask or say?

1. Although you invite questions during your presentation and leave time for questions at the end, no-one asks any.
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AIM

To learn polite ways of clarifying (potential) misunderstandings.

LEAD-IN

Ask learners what they say when they don't understand something. Point out that "What do you mean?" may sound too direct. Ask them to think of alternative ways of expressing this.

WORKSHEET

Learners discuss the situations in pairs and decide on the exact words they would say.

ANSWERS

A. In an international team

1. The speaker probably means that he wants to have the window open. — "Would you like me to open the window?" / "Shall we open the window"?
2. It may not be clear whether this is his surname or first name.— "Hello, I'm Dieter Braun. Do call me Dieter."

"Shall I call you Zoltan" / "What would you like me to call you?"

3. This is probably an order. - "Would you like me to give it to you on Monday morning or will after lunch be okay?" / "Okay I'll give it to you on Monday at 11. Will that be okay?"
4. He probably means he wants to change it. - "We can change it if you want." / "I'm happy about changing it." / "What changes would you suggest?"
5. They may not want to have a barbecue (perhaps they do not like eating outdoors or are vegetarians) or they may not want to socialise with colleagues. - "Is there something else you would prefer to do?" / "Would you prefer to spend the weekend with your family?" / "Shall we just have a coffee after work on Friday?"

B. Presentations

1. They may be reluctant to ask questions in front of an audience. - "If you think of any questions later, please ask me at any time."
2. This may be because they are obliged to come to the presentation and do not understand everything (their English may not be very good). It is best not to say anything in a situation like this.
3. It is best to find out beforehand if you will be introduced. - "Do you want to say something before I start?"
4. This may be due to a misunderstanding of the presentation and that questions should be kept till the end. - "I hope to answer all your questions by the end. If you still have any, please feel free to ask me then."
5. It may be polite not to touch the food at all. - "This looks nice. May I keep it till after my presentation?" / "Can I eat this in the break?"

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

Ask learners to think of more situations themselves.

BACKGROUND

In some cultures it is not appropriate to inquire about everything and it may be better to wait and see what others do or what happens. However there are many ways of dealing with these situations, as the examples show, without being rude or too direct.