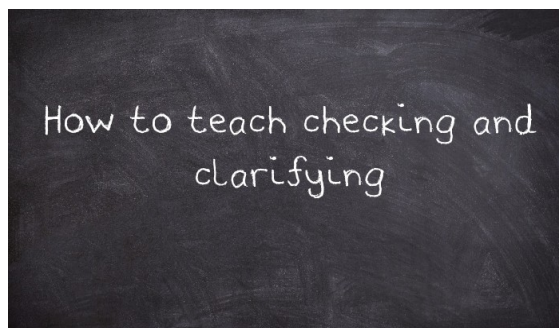


Check and Clarify Meaning



Suitable phrases can be broadly divided into ones which are to help the other person understand and ones which are to seek (more) help understanding. These can be further divided into:

- Asking for clarification of a particular point (e.g. "What does... mean?").
- Checking your understanding (e.g. "If I understand you correctly...").
- Just showing a lack of understanding (e.g. "Pardon?").
- Asking for changes in the delivery (e.g. "Can you explain that again, but starting at the end and working your way back?", "Can you give me another word for...?", "Can you speak a little bit more slowly, please?" and "Can you spell that for me, please?").
- Responding to language, body language, facial expressions etc. that show that clarification is needed (e.g. "I can see from your face that I haven't explained myself well").
- Giving more explanation before it is asked for (perhaps explaining why more explanation is given with phrases like "Many people think that...").
- Other mentioning of the other person's (probable) lack of understanding (e.g. "I know you're not really into computers, so sorry if that wasn't clear").
- Offering more explanation if needed (e.g. "If any of that isn't clear...").

- Asking if a particular part is clear (e.g. “Not many people know how to spell that, so...”).
- More general enquiries about if you are being understood (e.g. “Is that clear so far?”).

You could also indicate a situation where additional clarification might be necessary with phrases like “The meaning is somewhat ambiguous but...”, and the person listening might need phrases for correcting their partner like “Did you mean to say...?” Students will also probably need phrases to interrupt the person who is speaking in order to ask for clarification and phrases for getting back on track after they give more explanation.

There is a big list of useful language for all of these at the end of this topic from which you can choose suitable phrases for your students’ level and typical communication problems.

Common student problems with checking and clarifying language include:

- Using “I beg your pardon” when a shorter phrase would be more suitable.
- Using “What?” when something more formal would be more suitable.
- Similar things with sounds like “Eh?”.
- Other direct translations like “One more (time)”.
- Using very vague expressions like “I don’t understand” that don’t give the person speaking any information on which parts are not understood or why.
- Using too direct checking understanding expressions like “Do you understand?”, which can sound like teachers disciplining children!
- Redundant words in expressions like “Repeat again”.

Activities to teach checking and clarifying

Even more than other kinds of functional language, the best way of presenting checking and clarifying phrases and tactics is to first put students into a situation where they need the language, in order to see what they can already do and then help them expand on it. No attempt is therefore given to divide the activities below into presentation and practice ones, although the ones near the top are generally more suitable for presenting a large amount of language.

Checking and clarifying gestures

You can elicit or practice phrases for showing general lack of understanding, asking for repetition, showing you can't hear, asking the speaker to slow down, etc. with gestures such as cupping an ear and shrugging shoulders.

Checking your understanding or their understanding card game

Students listen to typical checking and clarifying phrases and race to hold up one of the two cards that they have been given depending on whether it is for "Checking the other person's understanding" (e.g. "Are you following me?" and "Is that clear?") or "Checking your own understanding" (e.g. "Do you mean...?" and "What does the last word mean...?").

Checking and clarifying tips and useful phrases

As there are many cultural differences and general communication tactics related to this point, it is worth tying together tips and language. One way of doing this is to give students a list of good and bad tips like "Try to be specific about what you don't understand" and "Use 'I do beg your pardon' as a more polite way of saying 'What'". After crossing off the bad advice, students work together to brainstorm phrases for doing the things that they should.

Checking and clarifying politeness competition

As mentioned above, there are many potential politeness issues with checking/clarifying. One way of practicing getting past that is to give some short and obviously rude phrases like "What?" and "Understood?" for students to improve on, perhaps as a game where they have to come up with more and more polite versions and the politest wins.

Checking and clarifying longer phrases games

Another way of looking at the problems with rude clarifying and checking phrases is that they are usually simply too short. You can therefore get them to play the politeness competition game above, but with the challenge being instead to make a longer sentence than what is given and then their partners do. If you collect some longer phrases which are versions of shorter ones, you can also split these into two or three pieces of paper for students to try to fit together. After doing so, those slips of paper can also be used in the games below.

Checking and clarifying with pieces of paper

There are several games in which students are dealt pieces of paper which they can dispose of during the communicative activity, with the person with the fewest cards at the end winning that round or the game. The simplest to set up is to give the students cards with names of functions like “Check what something specific means” and “Clarify something before you asked about it” that they must do the function of to be able to discard that card. They can also be given specific words and/ or phrases that they should use while speaking in the same way. You will need to set up the situation each time they speak - see roleplays below for some suggestions.

Checking and clarifying first lesson

This point can be brought up in the very first class by getting students to interview each other and write what they learn down on an interview form, not allowing them to show the form to each other or write their answers down to stimulate this kind of language. This can be further encouraged with questions that are difficult to understand (e.g. “Educational career”) and questions that stimulate dictation (e.g. “Present classes” and “Full name”).

Dictogloss for checking and clarifying

Dictation is probably the most natural way of bringing up checking and clarifying language. This can simply be done with the teacher dictating with something similar to a dictogloss. The teacher reads out a text fairly quickly twice, with students taking notes the second time. Students try to reconstruct the whole text in pairs and small groups, in this variation without showing their notes to each other in order to stimulate more clarifying and checking language. In this variation, each group can then ask the teacher a certain fixed number of questions (e.g. six) before comparing their versions to the original, with the best version getting points or at least congratulations.

Pairwork dictation for checking and clarifying

An obvious thing to do to add even more checking and clarifying language is to get students dictating to each other. This can be made more intensive practice still by giving them things to dictate that commonly cause confusions (for speakers of their language or more generally) such as particular letters of the alphabet, minimal pairs, and difficult to distinguish numbers (15 and 50 etc.).

There are also dictation-based ideas which are less like a normal teacher-led dictation. For example, you could give them mixed up pairs of sentence halves, collocations, split idioms etc. on Student A and Student B worksheets to match and write down without showing their partner their sheet. You could also do a Running Dictation, or simply do a telephoning roleplay involving dictation. There are numerous other ways of getting students to do this in the book *Dictation: New Methods New Possibilities* by Mario Rinvolucris and Paul Davis.

You can also turn more common speaking activities like ranking tasks into dictation by giving students half of the options each and ask both of them to write their finished list without showing anything to each other.

Use and explain activities

A more general tip can be made out of the last activity, which is to give students words and phrases that they should use during a communicative task plus explanations that they can add only when their partner asks for confirmation (or takes them up on their offer to explain). For example, one student could ask the other for advice using tricky words given on the worksheet when explaining their problems. The person giving advice should ask checking understanding questions before giving their advice.

Checking and clarifying roleplays

The best roleplays are usually realistic situations for this kind of language, such as explaining how to do something, giving directions and other instructions, explaining problems, dictating (e.g. names, URLs, email address, postal addresses), leaving messages, teleconferencing, talking about something that isn't visible, talking about processes, explaining options, explaining the reasons for something (e.g. why a recent news story happened), and something a student knows more about than their partner.

You can also prompt more unnatural but fun practice by telling students to exaggerate, e.g. by misunderstanding everything, talking too quickly and being vague.

Checking and clarifying classroom questions

Another way of looking at clarifying and checking questions is as a part of classroom language. As well as setting up activities where students need to ask the teacher questions and giving one student the information they need to answer their partner's queries as mentioned above, you can get students to test each other on recent or useful vocabulary with typical classroom checking questions like "Can you explain what... means?" and "How do you spell /.../ (in British English)?" (with the word given in phonemic symbols, as an abbreviation or in another variety of English). Those sentences can also be presented in a similar way by giving students the written questions to answer about some vocabulary, then getting them to use the same questions to test each other.

222 checking and clarifying phrases (in alphabetical order)

1. (Are there) any questions before I go on?
2. (Do) go on.
3. (Excuse me but) did you say...?
4. (I guess) I haven't explained that very well, so...
5. (I think) I missed the bit where you explained...
6. (I'm afraid/ I'm sorry but/ Sorry but) I didn't catch (all of) that.
7. (I'm afraid/ I'm sorry but/ Sorry but) I'm not (really) following (you/ what you are saying/ your explanation/ your argument).
8. (I'm afraid/ Sorry but) I'm not keeping up with you.
9. (I'm afraid/ Sorry but) that hasn't (really/ entirely) cleared it up for me.
10. (Is there) anything that needs clearing up before I continue?
11. (Just) to check if I (fully) understand you...
12. ..., which is (commonly/ usually) defined as ...

13. ... could perhaps do with a bit more explanation.
14. ... explains/ explained this by...
15. ... is a new term/ new concept for me.
16. ... might benefit from some more explanation.
17. ..., by which I mean...
18. ..., meaning...
19. ..., something whose (dictionary/ technical/ official) definition is...
20. ..., which (basically) means (that)...
21. ..., which can be defined as...
22. ..., which I would define as...
23. ..., i.e...
24. A (rough) synonym/ translation/ equivalent would be...
25. A simpler (but less precise) definition/ explanation is...
26. Am I going through it too quickly?
27. Am I making sense?
28. Am I right in thinking that it is...?
29. And that means?
30. And?
31. Are you familiar with the term/ word/ concept (...)?

32. Are you going to explain...?
33. Are you planning to explain...?
34. Are you still with me?
35. Before I go on, I should probably clarify...
36. Before you said that, I thought you meant/ were talking about...
37. Beg your pardon.
38. But (earlier) didn't you say...?
39. Can/ Could I confirm (whether)...?
40. Can/ Could I take you back to the place where...?
41. Can/ Could you be more explicit?
42. Can/ Could you clear up for me whether...?
43. Can/ Could you confirm (whether)...?
44. Can/ Could you draw it for me?
45. Can/ Could you elaborate (on that)?
46. Can/ Could you explain a little more about...?
47. Can/ Could you explain it /that / ... just one more time?
48. Can/ Could you explain that another way?
49. Can/ Could you explain that in (a little) more detail?
50. Can/ Could you explain that in layperson's terms?

51. Can/ Could you explain what you mean by...?
52. Can/ Could you give me an example (of what you mean/ of the kind of thing you mean/ of what you are talking about)?
53. Can/ Could you put that in other words?
54. Can/ Could you repeat (what you just said)?
55. Can/ Could you say that (just) one more time?
56. Can/ Could you say that again (another way)?
57. Can/ Could you speak (a little more) slowly, please?
58. Can/ Could you spell that/ ... (for me)?
59. Can/ Could you start again right from the beginning?
60. Can/ Could you write it down for me?
61. Did you (already) explain...?
62. Did you mean to say...?
63. Do you (perhaps) mean...?
64. Do you understand (the meaning of) the word...?
65. Does anything need explaining (before I move on)?
66. Does that mean...?
67. E.g?
68. Eh?
69. For example,...

70. For example?
71. For those unfamiliar with the word/ term..., it means...
72. Got it (so far)?
73. Have I explained myself properly?
74. Have you come across the word... (before)?
75. Have you heard of...?
76. Hopefully I've made it obvious that...
77. Hopefully it's clear that I mean...
78. Hopefully you can understand from my explanation that...
79. How do you spell that/...?
80. How would you (directly) translate that into (Japanese)?
81. How would you define...?
82. How would you say that in (Japanese)?
83. I (still) don't (quite) get it.
84. I (still) don't (quite) understand (...)
85. I basically know what you mean, but...
86. I can explain that another way if you like.
87. I can illustrate this point with an analogy...
88. I can see from your face/ expression that...

89. I can tell from your voice/ body language that...
90. I can't (really) picture it.
91. I can't hear you (very well).
92. I could (still) do with a little/ some (more) explanation (of...)
93. I don't (quite) understand what you mean by ...
94. I don't know if you've come across that (word/ term/ concept) before.
95. I don't know much/ anything about this subject, so...
96. I don't mean by that... (but rather...)
97. I don't quite see what you're getting at.
98. I get the general drift, but...
99. I got (a bit) lost (about) halfway through.
100. I guess you mean...
101. I have (absolutely) no idea what you are trying to say!
102. I have a question about...
103. I have another explanation (up my sleeve) if that one's no good.
104. I haven't come across that use of... (before).
105. I imagine you mean...
106. I might be starting to understand, but...
107. I mostly understand what you're saying, but...

108. I think I understand (what you mean), but...
109. I thought I was following you, but (then)...
110. I understood that to be/ mean...
111. I was following your argument (up) until you got to...
112. I was with you up to (the point that) ...
113. I'm afraid I don't understand what you meant when you said...
114. I'm guessing that means...
115. I'm having difficulty understanding you/ following you/ hearing you.
116. I'm having problems understanding you/ hearing you/ following you.
117. I'm not (entirely) sure what... means.
118. I'm not (quite) clear what you mean by ...
119. I'm not (quite) sure (that) I see what you're getting at.
120. I'm not (very) familiar with the word/ term/ meaning of...
121. I'm not (very) familiar with this topic, so...
122. I'm not sure I (fully) understand you.
123. I'm using that term here with its (usual) sense of...
124. I've never (even) heard of...
125. I've never heard the word/ term... before.
126. If a simpler explanation is needed/ would help...

127. If I understand you correctly, (you're saying) ...
128. If you need a simpler explanation...
129. I'm not (quite) sure (that) I follow you/ get your point/ know what you mean.
130. In case that isn't clear...
131. In layperson's terms,...
132. In other words,...
133. In simpler terms,...
134. In words of one syllable...
135. In... this is explained as...
136. Is that (all) clear (so far)?
137. Is that a different meaning of... (to...)?
138. Is that the same as...?
139. Is that...?
140. Is there a more straightforward way of explaining...?
141. Is there another way of saying that/...?
142. It all sounds like gobbledygook.
143. It's all Greek to me.
144. It's going in one ear and out the other.
145. It's quite loud in here, so...

146. Just guessing from context,...
147. Let me explain that in more detail...
148. Let me put it in another way...
149. Like what?
150. Many people think that means..., but in fact...
151. Meaning?
152. Meaning..., right?
153. More explanation please.
154. My English isn't very good, so...
155. Now I'm (even) more confused.
156. Obviously I mean...
157. Pardon?
158. Please let me know if that isn't clear.
159. Say again?
160. Say what now?
161. Say what?
162. Simply put,...
163. So, basically...
164. So, if I understand you correctly...

165. So, in your view...
166. So, what you're saying is...
167. So, would I be right in saying...?
168. So, would it be correct to say that...?
169. So?
170. Some more explanation (of...) might make it a bit clearer for me.
171. Sorry?
172. Such as?
173. Surely you mean...
174. That can't be right.
175. That doesn't make sense (to me).
176. That's (about) as clear as mud.
177. That's probably not a good enough explanation, so...
178. That's..., right?
179. The meaning is (somewhat) ambiguous but...
180. The most common definition of that is...
181. The term... is (commonly/ usually) used to mean...
182. There seems to be a contradiction between... and...
183. There's one thing I don't (quite) understand.

184. This is a little tricky for me to understand, so...
185. This is probably just me being thick, but...
186. This word/ term is used to mean...
187. To be more precise,...
188. To clarify (what I mean) ...
189. To explain further...
190. To put it another way...
191. To show you what I mean...
192. To simplify (somewhat/ quite a lot) ...
193. Was that clearer?
194. What (exactly) are you getting at/ trying to say?
195. What do you mean by...?
196. What does the last word/ bit/ sentence/ idea/ the word.../ the expression... mean (in this context)?
197. What I understand from that is...
198. What I wanted to say was...
199. What I'm trying to say is...
200. What on earth does... mean?
201. What was that again?
202. What were you referring to when you mentioned...?

203. What you want to say is..., right?
204. What?
205. What's that in Japanese/ normal English/ everyday English/ layman's terms?
206. What's the difference between... and...?
207. What's your point?
208. Would you define... as...?
209. You don't seem (entirely/ very) happy with my explanation, so...
210. You don't seem to be using... to mean...
211. You look like you have no idea what I'm talking about.
212. You lost me at...
213. You may as well be speaking a foreign language.
214. You meant to say..., right?
215. You might think that means, but in fact...
216. You said..., right?
217. You seem to be assuming that I know about/ understand...
218. You seem to be using... to mean...
219. You're going to have to explain it for me from first principles.
220. You're speaking too quietly.
221. You're staring at me with a blank face/ like I'm speaking Greek/ like I've totally lost you.

222. You've (totally) lost me.

Reference:

Case, A. (2024). How to teach checking and clarifying. UsingEnglish.com. Retrieved from: <https://www.usingenglish.com/teachers/articles/how-to-teach-checking-clarifying.html>