Avoiding Miscommunications

Warm Up:

- Have you ever had a conversation in English with someone who was particularly hard to understand? What made it difficult to understand them?
- What strategies do you use to avoid miscommunication in English or your native language?
- Have you ever had a particularly funny or embarassing miscommunication in another language? What happened?

1. Toby works for a real estate development company. Kay, his boss, is sending him to the Netherlands for market research. Read Kay's quote from their meeting and Toby's notes below. What mistakes did he make? Where do you think these mistakes came from?

Kay: "Well at first we wanted to send you to a city called Rotterdam, but then we thought Amsterdam and Utrecht might be better. Your flight leaves at 12pm on Thursday, and we've already booked a rental car for you. You'll be staying at a hotel in Amsterdam for a fortnight, and after that a week in Utrecht. We want you to focus on apartment buildings which could potentially be turned into shopping malls. We'd like you to talk to experts, look at land prices, land quality, and construction costs. In particular I'd like you to talk to Richard Jansen, who specialises in Dutch real estate investment. We've worked with Richard before and he's a great guy, I think you and him will get along like a house on fire. He will show you about 20 different properties in Amsterdam and Utrecht, but keep in mind our spending cap for this project is approximately 80 million dollars. Any questions?"

Toby: "Umm. No I think I've got everything, thanks."

- Fly to Rotterdam, then Amsterdam, then Utrecht. ***Not going to Rotterdam***
- Flight leaves at midnight, Thursday :(***Flight leaves at 12, midday***
- Car organised, bring license!
- 4 nights in Amsterdam, then a week in Utrecht. ***A fortnight in Amsterdam***
- Company wants to buy shopping malls. ***Company wants to buy apartments***
- Meet with Jansen, expert in real estate investment in the Netherlands.
- House on fire??? ***Toby and Richard will like each other***
- Looking for properties worth $18 mil or less. ***80 million, not 18***

Clarifying Complex Sentences

Unfortunately, people often use complicated words or phrases to say simple things. For example, the sentence "At the moment budgetary constraints mean that we cannot purchase your product" simply means "We do not have enough money." Asking the speaker to repeat themselves if you do not understand is not always the best strategy. Often if you think you understand but are not sure, it is a good idea to state your understanding in basic words to see if you have the correct idea.

E.g. *"Your proposal would almost certainly be seen as a breach of finance laws by the government."*

"Ok so in other words, it's illegal?"

2. Match the complex statements on the left to their meaning on the right.

a) Our plans to expand into the Netherlands have encountered an unforeseen setback. *5*	1. They don't like each other.
b) At the moment our revenue is not sufficient to cover our costs, and our accounts are depleting. *3*	2. We don't have enough time.
c) The government has launched an investigation into our accounts, and will be watching us closely. *6*	3. We're losing money.
d) The accountant and the financial advisor don't get along, and rarely see eye to eye. *1*	4. We'll kick them out if they can't pay rent.
e) They are attempting to force us to pay them through litigation. *7*	5. There will be a delay.
f) We were excited about the project, but sadly it looks like it won't be feasible due to time constraints. *2*	6. We're being audited.
g) If they are unable to provide us with payment for their accommodation, we will be forced to evict them. *4*	7. They're suing us.

3. Your partner will read the complicated statements from the exercise above. Combine the phrases in the box below with the simple statements.

E.g. *"At the moment our revenue is not sufficient to cover our costs, and our accounts are depleting."*

"So in other words, we're losing money."

Ok so you're saying that…	Does that mean that….?	So what you mean is….?
So basically…., is that right?	So in other words…	Just to clarify, that means….
So if I understand correctly that means…		Ok so in short….., is that correct?

4. Read the complicated statements and write your own clarifying question using the phrases from exercise 3.

a) "We will be in contact via postal service, please wait for our correspondence."
Eg *"So just to clarify, you'll send me a letter, is that right?"*

....

b) "I regret to inform you that we seem to have misplaced your luggage."

....

c) "In order to provide you with a visa, we require 2 forms of photographic identification."

....

d) "I believe that we can accept your generous offer, however I will need to correspond with my employer and confirm that he finds it equally acceptable."

....

e) "Residential real estate is not my area of expertise, and therefore I will not be able to assist you in this matter."

....

Asking for Specific Information

Another way of clarifying is to ask more specific questions instead of just asking the person to repeat what they said. This shows that you understand what the person is talking about, but did not get the exact information.

E.g. *"The construction will take about 13 years"*

"I'm sorry how long will it take?"

5. Toby is meeting with Mr Jansen, the real estate expert. Read Mr Jansen's statement below and write your own "asking for specific information" questions on the next page to discover the crossed-out information.

"The property market in Amsterdam right now is very strong, housing prices have increased by ~~12.5%~~ (a)this year which is actually the highest increase on record. I know that your company often buys residential properties and develops them into commercial buildings such as offices and shopping malls, but in this case I would advise against that. I talked to ~~Andrew Dekker~~(b), a property lawyer, and he told me it is almost impossible to evict tenants from their apartments in Amsterdam, even if you own the building. In some cases it can take up to ~~50 years~~ (c) to clear a building of tenants. We can look at a few apartment buildings if you like, but I think we should look at non-residential properties too. I'd like to meet you at number 50 ~~Lydekker st~~ (d) tomorrow morning, there is a property there that I think may be perfect for your plans. The property was an elementary school, but was recently closed down ~~because a larger school was opened in the area~~ (e). I know it's early, but I'd like to meet you there at ~~7am~~ (f), I have a lot to show you."

a) Eg. *"I'm sorry to interrupt, how much did the housing prices increase by?"*

b) *Who did you meet with?*

c) *How long can it take?*

d) *Where are we meeting?*

e) *Why was it closed down?*

f) *When are we meeting?*

6. Read Mr Jansen's statement above to your partner, and when they ask their questions, repeat the information more clearly.

7. Toby is meeting with Kay after his trip, and Kay wants to make sure she understands exactly what he is saying. Complete the conversation using "clarifying complex information" questions for information in *italics* and "asking for specific information" questions for underlined information.

Kay: "Welcome back Toby. How was the Netherlands?"

Toby: "It was fantastic, I had a great time and I learned a lot about the market."

Kay: "Well great, let's get down to business then. What did you learn?"

Toby: "Well first of all the average rent in Amsterdam is approximately $980 per month, and that means-"

Kay: "I'm sorry to interrupt, *how much is the average rent per month?"*

Toby: "It's $980 per month. As I was saying, the average rent is $980 per month. I talked to Mr Jansen and he said-"

Kay: "Im sorry to interrupt again, *who did you talk to?"*

Toby: "Richard Jansen, he's an expert in real estate investment in the Netherlands"

Kay: "Ah I see."

Toby: "He was very helpful, and he told me that housing prices are skyrocketing*, largely due to serious supply shortages."*

Kay: "*So basically there's not enough houses in Amsterdam?"*

Toby: "Exactly. Housing prices have increased by approximately 13% this year, which is huge."

Kay: *housing prices increased by how much?"*

Toby: "13 percent. Now we believe these price increases are likely to continue for at least the next 5 years, and so *we should strike while the iron is hot and acquire properties quickly."*

Kay: *"Basically you're saying we should buy as much property as we can as quickly as we can?"*

Toby: "Well…. Not quite. I do think we should buy property quickly, but we should think twice before we buy rental properties with plans to convert them to commercial properties like shopping centres"

Kay: "And why is that?"

Toby: "Dutch laws make it extremely difficult to *evict tenants, so purchasing a residential building and making it into a shopping centre would be a risky proposition."*

Kay: "*So in other words we can't kick people out of their apartments, so we can't turn apartment buildings into shopping malls?"*

Toby: "That's right. However, there may be another option for an inner-city shopping centre. A large piece of land recently opened up in a central area. It's 1400 square meters."

Kay: *"How many square meters?"*

Toby: "1400. It used to be a school, but the city has moved the students to a larger school nearby. They have decided to rezone it as a commercial area. We would have to pay much more for construction costs, as the school would need to be knocked down completely, but despite the up-front costs*, I believe in the long run this is a much more fiscally attractive choice."*

Kay: *"So you mean it would cost more in the beginning but save us money in the end?"*

Toby: "Exactly"

8. Now listen to the conversation and check your answers. Your questions may be slightly different from Kay's.