

How to Prepare Your First Customer Meeting in Technical English

If you are new to your job and still learning the ins and outs¹, it may seem daunting² to meet a client who speaks a foreign language. What are some strategies you can take to be able to deal professionally and successfully with³ this challenge?

Here are some steps you can take before, during and after almost any potential client⁴ meeting when the specific technical terminology⁵ may be new to you – whether it's in your own language or not.

Before the appointment

1) Prepare an FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) list

Think of the likely questions⁶ potential clients ask you in your mother tongue.

It is a good idea to write the questions and answers in your mother tongue first, if your level of English is at a beginner to intermediate level.

Identify which words in your mother tongue you do not know in the foreign language and look them up using a dictionary or google their images. Use an online dictionary or find an image online with an English description. This helps to verify that you translate the word correctly.

Write this new word down on a "cheat sheet"⁷ along with the translation that you can study from. This can be on paper, in an Excel sheet or with an app, such as Quizlet, for study purposes⁸.

Bookmark any online images⁹ to quickly access them¹⁰ again and use as a reference tool.¹¹

Work through 1 or 2 different scenarios.¹² Practice by saying the new words and sentences out loud¹³ that you may need. When you can answer the clients first 5 basic questions, this will help you feel more confident¹⁴ at the start of the meeting and help gain the trust of your client¹⁵.

¹ ins and outs (E)	Einblicke und Ausblicke (D)	les tenants et les aboutissants (F)
² seem daunting (E)	scheinen entmutigend zu sein (D)	semblent décourageantes (F)
³ deal...with (E)	behandeln...mit (D)	traiter ...avec (F)
⁴ potential client (E)	potenzieller Kunde (D)	client potentiel (F)
⁵ technical terminology (E)	Fachterminologie (D)	terminologie technique (F)
⁶ likely questions (E)	Wahrscheinliche Fragen (D)	questions probables (F)
⁷ cheat sheet (E)	Spickzettel (D)	fiche de fraude (F)
⁸ for study purposes (E)	für Studienzwecke (D)	a des fins d'étude (F)
⁹ bookmark any online images (E)	setzen Sie ein Lesezeichen für alle Online-Bilder (D)	ajoutez les images en ligne à vos favoris (F)
¹⁰ to quickly access them (E)	um schnell auf sie zuzugreifen (D)	pour y accéder rapidement (F)
¹¹ use as a reference tool (E)	Verwendung als Referenzwerkzeug (D)	utiliser comme outil de référence (F)
¹² work through(E)	durcharbeiten (D)	travaillez sur (F)
¹³ out loud (E)	laut (D)	à haute voix (F)
¹⁴ feel more confident	sich sicherer fühlen (D)	se sentir plus confiant (F)
¹⁵ gain the trust of(E)	das Vertrauen ...zu gewinnen (D)	gagner la confiance de (F)

2) Prepare a file of pictures for the client

If you find it difficult remembering new words, be sure to use a company catalog, magazine or online pictures you have bookmarked or stored on a device that you can access and use during your meeting. This can save time looking for words to describe exactly what you mean. ¹⁶

Think of how hairdressers apply this tip ¹⁷ by showing clients specific hair colours and styles. In the home remodelling business ¹⁸, this can come in handy ¹⁹, particularly when ²⁰ talking about technical words clients, themselves, may not be familiar with ²¹.

Looking at the pictures or layouts may generate a new line of questioning ²² you hadn't considered ²³. If so, repeat Step 1 and create more FAQ's and add to your wordlist not only for this appointment but others to come ²⁴.

3) Ask the clients to send their questions before the meeting via e-mail to you

If after you take these steps and you still feel unsure and nervous, then you can always help yourself out by sending a pre-session questionnaire ²⁵ or a short e-mail to them. The more details you know in advance about what territory the meeting will cover ²⁶, the more in control you will feel if you can do some homework beforehand.

This gives you more time to look up words ²⁷ and pictures you may need that answer your client's specific questions. Here are some examples of what you could write, 3-7 days before the meeting is to take place ²⁸:

"To prepare for our meeting, please fill out the attached questionnaire. We thank you in advance for your time and look forward to our meeting."

"To prepare myself for our upcoming meeting, could you share with me specific questions you have prepared? This way, if research is required to answer them fully, this can be done in advance. Time can then be saved in our meeting to work out the details. I look forward to our discussion and thank you in advance for your time."

¹⁶ Describe exactly what (E)...	beschreiben Sie genau, was (D)	décrivez exactement ce que ... (F)
¹⁷ how (to) apply this tip (E)	wie Sie diesen Tipp anwenden (können) (D)	comment (appliquer) ce conseil (F)
¹⁸ home remodelling business (E)	Geschäft für Hausumbau (D)	entreprise d'aménagement de l'habitat (F)
¹⁹ This can come in handy.(E)	Dies kann sich als nützlich erweisen. (D)	Cela peut s'avérer utile. (F)
²⁰ particularly when (E)	insbesondere wenn (D)	en particulier lorsque (F)
²¹ may not be familiar with (E)	Sie sind vielleicht nicht vertraut mit (D)	peut ne pas être familier avec (F)
²² generate a new line of questioning (E)		
eine neue Befragungszeile generieren (D)		générer une nouvelle ligne de questionnement (F)
²³ you hadn't considered (E)	Sie hatten nicht bedacht (D)	vous n'aviez pas envisagé (F)
²⁴ not only ...but also... (E)	nicht nur--- sondern auch (D)	non seulement ...mais aussi (F)
²⁵ pre-session questionnaire (E)	Fragebogen vor der Sitzung (D)	Questionnaire de pré-session (F)
²⁶ about what territory the meeting will cover (E)		
darüber, welches Gebiet das Treffen abdecken wird (D)		sur le territoire qui sera couvert par la réunion (F)
²⁷ look up words (E)	Wörter nachschlagen (D)	chercher des mots (F)
²⁸ take place (E)	findet statt (D)	à avoir lieu (F)

NOTE: This option might not be suitable for everyone²⁹, though³⁰, since this could lead to ³¹potential clients expecting you to be available³² to answer more questions than you may be able to handle³³. So this option needs to be considered carefully³⁴.

During the appointment

1) Set realistic language comprehension expectations ³⁵with the client right away³⁶

It is very important to set the clients' expectations about your comprehension and speaking level clearly from the start. Don't be shy ³⁷to use some of the following phrases besides the common one "I speak English a little bit."

"Before we start, I want to let you know I do speak some English but there are some technical words I may not know. But I am sure together, with a little patience, we can manage to understand each other."³⁸

"I hope you don't mind ³⁹that I may interrupt you sometimes in case ⁴⁰I don't understand you. I can speak (English) but it's not perfect yet⁴¹."

²⁹ This option might not be suitable for everyone (E)	Diese Option ist möglicherweise nicht für jeden geeignet. (D)	Cette option peut ne pas convenir à tout le monde. (F)
³⁰ Though (E)	obwohl (D)	bien que (F)
³¹ This could lead to (E)	Dies könnte dazu führen, dass (D)	Cela pourrait conduire à (F)
³² expecting you to be available (E)	erwartet, dass Sie verfügbar sind (D)	l'attente de votre disponibilité (F)
³³ You may be able to handle (E)	vielleicht können Sie mit (D)	Vous pourriez être en mesure de gérer (F)
³⁴ This option needs to be considered carefully (E)	Diese Option muss sorgfältig geprüft werden. (D)	Cette option doit être examinée avec soin. (F)
³⁵ Set realistic language expectations (E)	realistische Erwartungen an die Sprache setzen (D)	fixer des attentes réalistes en matière de langues (F)
³⁶ Right away (E)	sofort (D)	toute de suite (F)
³⁷ Don't be shy (E)	Seien Sie nicht schüchtern (D)	ne soyez pas timide (F)
³⁸ We can manage to understand each other (E)	Wir können es schaffen, uns gegenseitig zu verstehen (D)	Nous pouvons parvenir à nous comprendre (F)
³⁹ I hope you don't mind (E)	Ich hoffe, Sie haben nichts dagegen. (D)	J'espère que cela ne vous dérange pas (F)
⁴⁰ I may interrupt you sometimes in case (E)	Ich kann Sie manchmal unterbrechen, falls (D)	Je peux parfois vous interrompre au cas où (F)
⁴¹ I can speak (English) but it's not perfect yet. (E)	Ich kann Englisch sprechen, aber es ist noch nicht perfekt. (D)	Je peux parler anglais mais je peux me débrouiller. (F)

2) A picture is worth a thousand words⁴²

When you get stuck⁴³, show them. If you are in a shop or showroom, you can easily point to what you mean.⁴⁴ The client may then give you the word in their language. When they do, it's a great idea for you to repeat it. Wait, for an approving response from your client to know you've got it right⁴⁵. Then for your next client, use the word you learned and ask to see if they understand you. If so, you've just learned a new word without looking it up in a dictionary!

Tip: If you are selling goods but are meeting in an office setting, be sure to bring catalogs with pictures in print or accessible online from your portable device – phone, notebook or laptop.

3) Ask them to show or draw a picture

In your pre-meeting e-mail, you can ask them to bring any professional drawings or details with them. However⁴⁶, there are times when⁴⁷ pictures of technical parts or processes are not available. If the client is having difficulties explaining something to you clearly, don't be shy to ask them to draw it for you if it makes sense.

Just be sure to have pen and paper ready, just in case.

You could say:

"I think I know what you mean but to be sure, would you mind drawing (the layout) for me?"

⁴² A picture is worth a thousand words (E) Ein Bild sagt mehr als tausend Worte. (D) Une image vaut mille mots. (F)

⁴³ When you get stuck (E) Wenn Sie feststecken (D) Quand vous êtes bloqué (F)

⁴⁴ Point to what you mean (E) Zeigen Sie, was Sie meinen (D) Pointez ce que vous voulez dire (F)

⁴⁵ Wait for an approving response from your client to know you've got it right. (E)

Warten Sie auf eine genehmigende Antwort Ihres Kunden, um zu wissen, dass Sie richtig liegen. (D)

Attendez une réponse positive de votre client pour savoir que vous avez raison. (F)

⁴⁶ However € jedoch (D) mais (F)

⁴⁷ There are times when (E) Es gibt Zeiten, in denen (D) Il y a des moments où (F)

4) Describe in simple words and wait for the “aha moment”

When your vocabulary level is good, you can also explain a word you are missing by using simpler words. There should be a clear “aha moment” that comes over the client’s face to show you he or she understands.

Of course, the client can do the same for you. He can explain something more simply if you don’t understand. But be sure to let him know you need clarification without waiting too long.

To interrupt the client naturally and smoothly⁴⁸, ask for clarification by first summarizing⁴⁹ what you did understand and then ask about what was unclear. For example, you can say something like:

“I understand what you’re saying. You want to but I didn’t understand (your reason). Could you please explain that to me more slowly/in a simpler way?”

5) Tell them you can clarify by e-mail

Sometimes, not everything can be explained or discussed in one meeting. If not all questions have been answered, be sure to summarize what points learned and what open questions remain.

Then confirm that you can answer remaining questions via e-mail. So, instead of spending too much time confused about⁵⁰ how to answer a question, you can stay professional and respond to them via e-mail. For example, you could say:

“Thank you for your patience with my English. I am not sure I understand what you mean. Could you please write your question here and I can look into it when I get back to my office. I promise I will provide an answer to you (by Friday).”

“It’s a pity we’ve run out of time. Could I ask you to send me an e-mail with any unanswered questions you may have? I will be sure to respond to you tomorrow.”

After the meeting

Call or send follow-up e-mail within the agreed time set with the client during the meeting

Of course, it is very important to fulfil any promises you have communicated with your client. Be sure to contact them again with a specific time set during your meeting.

If during the meeting you aren’t sure how long it is going to take you to respond, do not promise the client you will answer them “right away” or “as soon as possible”. Instead, set a realistic date and allow some buffer time, in case you need to rely on others to answer the question fully.

⁴⁸ To interrupt the client naturally and smoothly (E)

Den Kunden natürlich und reibungslos zu unterbrechen (D)

Interrompre le client naturellement et sans heurts (F)

⁴⁹ Ask for clarification by first summarizing (E)

Bitten Sie um Klärung, indem Sie zunächst zusammenfassen (D)

Demandez des éclaircissements en résumant d’abord (F)

⁵⁰ Instead of spending too much time confused about (E)

Anstatt zu viel Zeit mit der Verwirrung über (D)

Au lieu de passer trop de temps confus sur (F)

QUICK REFERENCE TO EXPRESSIONS

Pre-Meeting E-Mail: Requesting Information

To prepare for our meeting, please fill out the attached questionnaire. We thank you in advance for your time and look forward to our meeting.

To prepare myself for our upcoming meeting, could you share with me specific questions you have prepared? This way, if research is required to answer them fully, this can be done in advance. Time can then be saved in our meeting to work out the details. I look forward to our discussion and thank you in advance for your time.

At the Start of the Meeting: Set Expectations

“Before we start, I want to let you know I do speak some English but there are some technical words I may not know. But I am sure together, with a little patience, we can manage to understand each other.”

“I hope you don’t mind that I may interrupt you sometimes in case I don’t understand you. I can speak (English) but it’s not perfect yet.”

During the Meeting: Asking for Clarification

“I think I know what you mean but to be sure, would you mind drawing (the layout) for me?”

“I understand what you’re saying. You would like to but I didn’t understand (your reason). Could you please explain that to me more slowly/in a simpler way?”

Closing the Meeting

“Thank you for your patience with my English. I am not sure I understand what you mean. Could you please write your question here and I can look into it when I get back to my office. I promise I will provide an answer to you (by Friday).”

“It’s a pity we’ve run out of time. Could I ask you to send me an e-mail with any unanswered questions you may have? I will be sure to respond to you tomorrow.”

VOCABULARY USED IN ARTICLE

This has been written at a B2 level English so for those who may not be able to understand everything, I can highly recommending doing a quick copy/paste in your favorite online translation tool. Mine is:

www.deepl.com

V

Here is an English /French and German list of 50 words and expressions used in this article at a B1+ level (mid-intermediate) or above:

No	English words and phrases	German	French
1	ins and outs	Einblicke und Ausblicke	les tenants et les aboutissants
2	seem daunting	scheinen entmutigend zu sein	semblent décourageantes
3	deal...with	behandeln...mit	traiter... avec
4	potential client	potenzieller Kunde	client potentiel
5	technical terminology	Fachterminologie	terminologie technique
6	likely questions	Wahrscheinliche Fragen	questions probables
7	cheat sheet	Spickzettel	fiche de fraude
8	for study purposes	für Studienzwecke	a des fins d'étude
9	bookmark any online images	setzen Sie ein Lesezeichen für alle Online-Bilder	ajoutez les images en ligne à vos favoris
10	to quickly access them	um schnell auf sie zuzugreifen	pour y accéder rapidement
11	use as a reference tool	Verwendung als Referenzwerkzeug	utiliser comme outil de référence
12	work through 1 or 2 different scenarios	1 oder 2 verschiedene Szenarien durcharbeiten	travaillez sur un ou deux scénarios différents
13	out loud	laut	à haute voix
14	feel more confident	sich sicherer fühlen	se sentir plus confiant
15	help gain the trust of your client	helfen Sie mit, das Vertrauen Ihres Kunden zu gewinnen	Aidez à gagner la confiance de votre client
16	describe exactly what you mean	beschreiben Sie genau, was Sie meinen	décrivez exactement ce que vous voulez dire
17	how (to) apply this tip	wie Sie diesen Tipp anwenden (können)	comment (appliquer) ce conseil
18	home remodelling business	Geschäft für Hausumbau	entreprise d'aménagement de l'habitat
19	This can come in handy.	Dies kann sich als nützlich erweisen.	Cela peut s'avérer utile.
20	particularly when	insbesondere wenn	en particulier lorsque
21	may not be familiar with	Sie sind vielleicht nicht vertraut mit	Peut ne pas être familier avec
22	generate a new line of questioning	eine neue Befragungszeile generieren	générer une nouvelle ligne de questionnement
23	you hadn't considered	Sie hatten nicht bedacht	Vous n'aviez pas envisagé
24	not only for (this appointment) but for (others to come)	nicht nur für (diesen Termin), sondern auch für (andere, die noch kommen)	non seulement pour (cette nomination) mais pour (d'autres à venir)
25	pre-session questionnaire	Fragebogen vor der Sitzung	Questionnaire de pré-session

26	about what territory the meeting with cover	über welches Territorium das Treffen mit Deckung	Sur quel territoire la réunion avec couverture
27	look up words	Wörter nachschlagen	chercher des mots
28	to take place	findet statt	à avoir lieu
29	This option might not be suitable for everyone	Diese Option ist möglicherweise nicht für jeden geeignet.	Cette option peut ne pas convenir à tout le monde.
30	though	obwohl	bien que
31	This could lead to	Dies könnte dazu führen, dass	Cela pourrait conduire à
32	expecting you to be available	erwartet, dass Sie verfügbar sind	l'attente de votre disponibilité
33	You may be able to handle	vielleicht können Sie mit	Vous pourriez être en mesure de gérer
34	This option needs to be considered carefully	Diese Option muss sorgfältig geprüft werden.	Cette option doit être examinée avec soin.
35	set realistic language expectations	realistische Erwartungen an die Sprache setzen	fixer des attentes réalistes en matière de langues
36	right away	sofort	tout de suite
37	Don't be shy	Seien Sie nicht schüchtern	ne soyez pas timide
38	We can manage to understand each other	Wir können es schaffen, uns gegenseitig zu verstehen	Nous pouvons parvenir à nous comprendre
39	I hope you don't mind	Ich hoffe, Sie haben nichts dagegen.	J'espère que cela ne vous dérange pas
40	I may interrupt you sometimes in case	Ich kann Sie manchmal unterbrechen, falls	Je peux parfois vous interrompre au cas où
41	I can speak English but it's not perfect yet	Ich kann Englisch sprechen, aber es ist noch nicht perfekt.	Je peux parler anglais mais je peux me débrouiller.
42	A picture is worth a thousand words.	Ein Bild sagt mehr als tausend Worte.	Une image vaut mille mots.
43	When you get stuck	Wenn Sie feststecken	Quand vous êtes bloqué
44	Point to what you mean	Zeigen Sie, was Sie meinen	Pointez ce que vous voulez dire
45	Wait for an approving response from your client to know you've got it right	Warten Sie auf eine genehmigende Antwort Ihres Kunden, um zu wissen, dass Sie richtig liegen.	Attendez une réponse positive de votre client pour savoir que vous avez raison
46	however	jedoch	mais
47	There are times when	Es gibt Zeiten, in denen	Il y a des moments où
48	To interrupt the client naturally and smoothly	Den Kunden natürlich und reibungslos zu unterbrechen	Interrompre le client naturellement et sans heurts
49	Ask for clarification by first summarizing	Bitten Sie um Klärung, indem Sie zunächst zusammenfassen	Demandez des éclaircissements en résumant d'abord
50	Instead of spending too much time confused about	Anstatt zu viel Zeit mit der Verwirrung über	Au lieu de passer trop de temps confus sur