

Maba Talk

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Purpose. To help people experience the pressures and power struggles in a tight, hierarchical social structure. Players will explore social relationships in a fictitious society—the Mabanese—and will simulate Mabanese honorific communication.

Participants. Teens and adults interested in understanding missionary language learning and differing social roles overseas. Group size should be eight as a minimum, but the simulation will work better with larger groups. Even large groups can engage in the simulation if there is sufficient space to walk around.

Time: 1½ hours

Equipment: One deck of playing cards for every four participants.

Creating the Playing Pieces for Maba Talk:

- Divide into groups of four.
- Distribute one deck of cards to each group.
- Each group divides their deck into numbered and unnumbered cards. The Aces, Kings, Queens, and Jacks will be in one pile (face cards); the numbered cards will be in another pile.
- Shuffle both piles of cards.
- The face cards are labeled “Identity Cards.”
- The numbered cards are labeled “Language Cards.”

Identifying the Players in Maba Talk: There are four kinds of players in Maba Talk

- Students are identified by a Jack card.
- Women are identified by a Queen card.
- Men are identified by a King card.
- Government administrators are identified by an Ace card.

Select several to be missionaries. The “missionaries” are to leave the room—out of earshot. Tell them to read the Instructions for Missionaries and that you will come to speak to them in a few minutes.

The Identity Cards

Starting with the tallest in your group and continuing clockwise, each person selects an Identity Card and holds it face up so that everyone can see it. If a person draws a card identical to that of another in a group, that person is to draw again. When all have drawn an Identity Card there will be one man, one woman, one student, and one administrator in each group. When everyone has an Identity Card, secure the remaining Identity Cards and give them to the Administrator in your group.

The Language Cards

Deal seven cards to everyone in the group. Because few women in Indonesia have more than seven years of education the Woman is limited to seven cards. Deal one extra card to the Man, three extra cards to the Student, and four extra cards to the Administrator.

Note: Identity Cards differ from Language Cards in two important ways. First, the suit of a card means nothing for an Identity Card; but is important for a Language Card. Second, players show their Identity Card but never show their Language Cards. Players hold their Identity Card facing out; they hold their Language Cards facing toward themselves.

Playing Maba Talk

- All other people in the room are the Mabanese people. Important characteristics:
- The Mabanese are polite and soft-spoken.
- The highest value of the Mabanese people is showing respect and gaining personal respect.
- The Mabanese speak to one another according to their relative status.
- The dialects of the Mabanese language reflects the respect that the people show one another.
- The Mabanese have four dialects that are like four separate languages which they use in their day-to-day speech.

Give the following instructions:

1. *Say:* “In a few minutes you will begin to wander around the room and you will talk with one another in the Mabanese way. The only communication permitted is “Good morning,” “Thank you,” “Excuse me,” and “I’m sorry.” All other communication is done using the language cards. If you want to speak to someone of higher status, you must use the sophisticated language of diamonds. Remember, diamonds are for your betters.

- If you want to speak to someone of the same status, you must use the peer language of hearts. Remember, peers speak heart to heart.
- If you want to speak to someone of lower status, you must use the inferior language of clubs. Remember, students belong to clubs.
- You can speak to anybody in spades, because spades is the national language, which is used in education, government publications, and most business. It is not as sophisticated as the dialects of hearts, clubs, and diamonds, but it is understandable by everyone. Remember, spades are the national language for national development.

Note: If necessary, post the instructions above for all to see. The instructions, included posted instructions are hidden before the missionaries re-enter the room.

2. A speaker initiates a conversation by saying, “Good morning” and showing the person a card which he or she wants to trade and which is appropriate for his or her status as a speaker and the listener’s status. Several things can then happen:

- If the speaker offers a card that is inappropriate for the listener’s status, the listener says, “Excuse me,” draws one card from the first speaker’s hand, and gives the speaker a card. (Thus, you are penalized for offering the wrong kind of speech to someone.)
- If the listener is offered a card in an appropriate language and he or she must say, “Thank you,” and give a card of the appropriate suit to the speaker, if he or she has one. (Thus, you must reward polite, reasonable speech with “Thank you” and an answer in polite, reasonable speech.)
- If the listener cannot respond in the proper language, he or she does not say “Thank you,” but says “I’m sorry,” draws any card from the hand of the speaker, and returns a card to the speaker. (Thus, a person with limited ability to respond will have opportunity to gain new words if repeatedly spoken down to by superiors.)

Example 1

A Man says, “Good morning” and offers a Student a club. Because the Student has lower status than the Man, this is appropriate. The Student has both diamonds and spades in her hand, doesn’t want to give up the diamond, so she says “Thank you” and gives the Man a spade, taking the club that was originally offered.

Example 2

A Woman says, “Good morning” and offers another Woman a heart. This is appropriate, but the other Woman does not have a heart to offer in return. She says, “I’m sorry,” draws a card from the first Woman’s hand, and gives the first Woman any of her cards—even the one she drew if she doesn’t like it.

Example 3

An Administrator says, “Good morning” and offers a Man a spade. The Man has lots of diamonds, and no spades, so he forces out a “Thank you” and gives the Administrator a diamond.

Further Instructions

- You cannot avoid a conversation initiated by someone else, but you need not initiate a conversation with everyone you meet.
- Your highest values are giving appropriate respect and gaining personal respect. You give appropriate respect by following the rules and remembering to say “Excuse me,” “Thank you,” and “I’m sorry,” even if you don’t feel like it. You gain personal respect when you are treated with respect by those beneath you.
- You may gain a new identity by becoming a master in one language or a master of one subject. You master the spade language by having only spades in your hand. You master the other language by getting five cards in order in the same suit. You master one subject by getting five cards of the same number in any combination of suits. If you become a master in one language or a master of one subject, you may bring your cards to an Administrator. The Administrator will take your cards, give you an equal number of his or her own cards, and give you a new Identity Card. You do not need to accept a new identity just because you can. If you lose one of your cards in a conversation on your way to an Administrator, that’s life! Remember, you cannot avoid a conversation initiated by someone else, but you need not initiate a conversation with everyone you meet.

Note: Students move up to become Men or Women. Men and Women move up to become Administrators. Administrators move up by retiring as Observers.

- *Say:* “After a few minutes of play, some strange people will enter the room who will not understand how to communicate. You may not explain the rules to these people, and if they offer you cards, you will have to decide what the right response is for them. Students can answer any yes or no questions from the foreigners. No one else speaks English. Try to be polite, but if foreigners ask questions, all you may say is, “I’m sorry, I don’t speak English.” Other than that, you are limited to “Good morning,” “Thank you,” “Excuse me,” and “I’m sorry.” Alright. Mix and mingle. Let’s hear some Maba Talk!

Maba Talk

Instructions for Missionaries

You are a missionary who is newly arrived on Maba. You have met few English speaking missionaries in the capital city, but none of them are from your mission board. You have a passport which you must show at all times and have memorized a handful of sentences but are not sure when to use them. A few people speak enough English to answer yes or no questions, but other than that, you will have to rely on your own observations and the responses of the Mabanese in order to learn to communicate with the Mabanese culture. You will be given a short furlough whenever you report to the teacher with five words of the diamond language in your hand.

Maba Talk

Suggested Debriefing Questions

- How did you feel in your various identities?
- How did you feel when approached by a person of superior status? inferior status?
- What changes did you notice in your feelings as the game progressed?
- How did you feel after getting a new identity? How did you feel toward those of your own identity group?
- What groups began to form during the game?
- What changes of attitudes did people demonstrate?
- What were your initial feelings as a missionary?
- What progress did the missionaries make through the game?
- To whom were the missionaries most attracted? Why?
- What was this simulation supposed to show?
- What lessons about roles and language do we learn?
- What was frustrating to you as an American in living in such tightly structured roles?
- What effects did the strong social structure have on the different missionaries?
- How would you feel as a missionary spouse living in this society?
- What kind of people would be most effective in this kind of society?
- How do you think missionaries should approach language learning in this kind of society?
- What would be the best set of cards with which to start the game if you were a missionary?