

Speaking in Foreign-Language and Foreign-Culture Countries

by Robert Alan Black, Ph.D., CSP

“They’re smiling and nodding their heads, so they must understand.” If you have thought this when working with an American audience only to discover that they missed your message, just imagine what the experience can be like in Seoul (Korea), Taipei (Taiwan) or Bangkok (Thailand).



This spring, I played to a variety of audiences and groups in several countries. Unlike my previous world tour in 2001, this time, English wasn’t a primary language, as it is in Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Malaysia or India. In Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Thailand, English is a second language, but it is not understood as well as it is in other Asian countries, such as Singapore, Malaysia and Sri Lanka.

Picture this scene: you are in front of a group of graduate business students and their professors, about 75 in all. Every time you make a point, they nod their heads strongly and smile.

My gut told me they were not really understanding my English but just being polite. I stopped and jokingly challenged one of the students to explain what I had just said. When he hesitated, I rescued him, rather than take the chance of embarrassing him.



I went back and checked what had been understood. I again explained points that were missed, one by one, until students could make them clear to me and to each other. I asked them all to raise their right hands and repeat after me: “I will not nod my head and smile, unless I understand, for the rest of the presentation.” Then, we all laughed about it. When students started nodding their heads again, I gave them a look, and they laughed and stopped.

It turned out not to be simply the English language that was creating the problem; it was my “foreign” concepts. Although simple for us to grasp in our own Western culture, they were causing problems, as some of my concepts had in Japan two weeks before.



What’s your takeaway from my experience? Check with your audience periodically to be sure you are truly communicating, and do not assume that, because you share a basic language, they understand your true message. This truth applies even when you speak in your own country, state and city or town.

Since earning his CSP, Robert Alan Black has spent much of the last two years traveling the world and speaking on his expertise, Creativity. Because he has been a frequent and popular speaker overseas for many years, Alan is sharing his experiences in a monthly feature, with a view toward preparing some of our other members for international speaking. While he is traveling internationally as we go to press, Alan can be reached through his web site: www.cre8ng.com.

