

# SILENCE: WHO IS LISTENING?



One situation you may encounter during international business meetings is unfamiliar “silence.” Here are a couple of typical instances where silence – and the *use* of silence – can be confusing or disadvantageous if you are unprepared for it.

A common misstep many Americans make in international meetings is assuming the best English-speaker across the table is the person in charge. You should assume just the opposite! He/she is there for their foreign language skills only. There is also a tendency for native English speakers to hone in on their English-speaking counterparts during meetings and ignore the others. The “others” who may not say much may in fact be key decision makers or influencers, and should not be ignored just because they are silent. Be sure to direct some of the talk to them as well, and let the interpreters do their job. Imagine the U.S. President or British P.M. at a meeting with

the Russian President but having a conversation only with the interpreter, never looking at or engaging anyone else! Business people can take a lesson from the diplomats on this one.

A frequent complaint I've heard over the years from people making presentations or doing training in Asia, particularly in Japan and Korea, is that "Nobody ever asks questions!" and "They just nod their heads silently. I don't think they actually understood anything that was said!" An understanding of the sociological structure of the culture will usually be quite revealing. Using Japan as an example of any hierarchically-organized society, a junior person won't dare risk embarrassing his or her superior by asking a question that would best be directed to the boss, who is assumed to know the answer. The boss, on the other hand, can't risk being embarrassed by asking a question publically that he might be expected to know. So, everyone maintains a respectful silence. In these situations, don't resort to grade school teacher terror tactics and start asking questions of random individuals. You could do serious damage by embarrassing the wrong person in front of his or her colleagues or – worse – subordinates.

You can be sure, however, that someone is taking scrupulous notes and intense discussions will continue after the meeting, usually with emails asking many follow-up questions and requesting additional data. While some may view this as an inefficiency in training because questions were not asked during the meeting, it can equally be viewed as highly productive, since the discussion, analysis and study will continue long after the meeting has ended.

In American culture, there is a tendency to try to avoid having "awkward silence" in conversations. Silence is equated with being rude or unfriendly, and talking with being polite. This tendency, however, conveys a subtle cultural value that assigns more importance to talking for the sake of talking,

rather than contemplation and thinking – i.e., “silence.” Thus there is the urge by many Americans to “keep the conversation going” with talk, when in many cultures, “silence” is the acceptable, comfortable filler when nothing more should be said. In those cultures, particularly in Asia, it isn’t awkward at all. It is expected and polite.

Since this American tendency is well-known, foreigners will often use this then as a negotiating tactic and use silence to subtly prod their visitors into speaking more than they should. This invariably results in the “talkers” giving away more than was necessary in negotiations and deals. Every good salesman knows that once the agreement is made, “shut up, take the P.O. and go home,” and don’t risk undoing the sale by talking too much. This same rule needs to be applied to international selling and negotiating situations.

So, be sure you know who the power players are in the meeting. Talk to them, not just the English speakers. Don’t be surprised or disappointed if the Q&A session doesn’t go as planned. And learn to be comfortable with silence and use it to your advantage. (You might just find it works well at home, too!) By the way, we also have a very positive expression in English about silence: *Silence is Golden.*

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**SPEAK LIKE FORREST GUMP:  
Communicate With Your  
International Audience**



Forrest Gump's communication style was simple and direct, with nearly universal references to which everybody could relate: mother, food, friendship, and of course, those famous boxes of chocolates. Communication with your international audience should be in a similar fashion to Forrest's.

Oral comprehension is heavily dependent on the speaker's international English presentation skills. Keep in mind that everyone comprehends written English better than the spoken form so plenty of easy-to-follow written material is always appreciated.

International audiences will not grasp American historical or sports expressions, or the now antiquated British Imperial Units (which, ironically, only the U.S. continues to use in spite of the rest of the world using the Metric System.) Nor will international audiences quickly grasp long complex-

compound sentences, with modifying phrases and digressions, which are frequently used in formal English.

One of the most serious problems in comprehension – both oral and written – is the frequent use of idiomatic expressions in English. Berlitz, the famous international language school, has consistently found from their English language students that the overwhelming majority cite idioms and idiomatic expressions as the most difficult part of English. Part of the problem lies with the fact that for non-native English speakers, it is often difficult to identify an idiomatic expression from standard speech unless they consciously stop and think about it. *Make up.* (Cosmetics? Invention? Reconciliation? Produce? Compensate for?) *Break down.* (Broken? Details? Hysteria?) *Pick up.* (Increase? Grasp? Understand? ) Substituting standard words for these expressions may sometimes sound awkward to the native ear, but remember that the presentation is for the benefit of the *non-native* ear, and their comprehension will be greatly aided. And isn't that the point of making a presentation – for the audience to comprehend it?

Bottom line, keep the “Forrest Gump” rule in mind when presenting and talking: speak slowly, deliberately, simply and to the point. In your own presentations and conversations, if you're doing this and thinking to yourself, “I must sound like a ‘Forrest Gump’ or something! My colleagues must think I didn't graduate high school...” Fantastic! Then you're doing fine and are well on your way to successfully communicating with an international audience. That success will be measured by their correct comprehension of your message and fewer misunderstandings in your dealings with them.

In future columns, we will examine aspects of using *international English*: that is, the proper usage of the English language for maximizing effectiveness of communication with non-native speakers.

*To be revisited...*

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# **SPEAK LIKE FORREST GUMP: Captivate Your International Audience**



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*your* international sales and marketing team?

Over the years, Hollywood has provided us with some interesting models that could be used in developing successful training techniques for use overseas in non-English speaking countries. In the hit movie, "Forrest Gump," the main character sits on a park bench by a bus stop in a small town in the American South and starts talking to whoever is sitting next to him. He speaks slowly and deliberately, his

vocabulary limited by his admittedly low IQ, yet he holds his random audience rapt by the sheer force of the telling of his story – simple, straightforward, almost devoid of emotion, yet fascinating. So captivated did some listeners become that they passed up their bus to continue listening to his him.

The story of Forrest Gump is one of an amazing success made by a simple man in an honest, simple way. Contrast this with any number of other characters from movies such as “Tucker” from a few years ago, or the more recent Jordan Belfort from “The Wolf of Wall Street.” Brash, slick, fast-talking, almost larger than life. With their swagger, they were convincing at first to a certain type of audience, but in the end, they failed.

For a marketing specialist or support engineer sent overseas to meet with customers, train distributors, or give seminars, or for any manager trying to close a deal with an international account, you want to have a Forrest Gump. Here’s why...

The chances are that whoever goes abroad to introduce a new product to distributors and/or customers, give technical training, represent the company at an international exhibition or other marketing and technical support functions, or try to win new business, will not be a fluent speaker of the target audience’s language and will have to do it in English. That’s usually a problem in most international markets, since English is, obviously, not the common working language. Don’t conveniently deceive yourself: “every one does *not* speak English.” And certainly not to the extent you need to conduct business. It’s usually easy to deal with shopkeepers and hotel concierges in tourist areas whose job requires them to understand English. But it is quite another thing to try to communicate information to sales and marketing people, engineers, technicians or potential customers whose job on a daily basis has nothing to do with English, but who have to rely on you to get important information or training to do

their job or make a decision about whether to purchase your product.

These people will be listening to you in English as a second (or possibly third) language. Many of them studied English in junior high school, high school and college – enough to pass the tests on grammar and vocabulary as an academic subject but certainly not with any proficiency in oral comprehension and communication with native speakers. How many of us would venture forth to Spain and plan to do an important presentation relying on just our high school Spanish to train a sales force on our company's new product line, or try to close an important deal with a potential customer? Yet, that is essentially what we usually require of our audiences: "listen to me using your high school English and learn this important material or make a decision to buy my product..."

The success of your presentation, the effectiveness of your materials, and ultimately winning and keeping business, will hinge almost entirely on how well *you* communicate using *international English*. Remember the golden rule of sales: all things being reasonably the same, customers buy from people they like and trust. If your customers can't understand you well, how will they come to like and trust you? And if they don't like or trust you, they'll buy from someone else who can communicate with them better.

*To be revisited...*