

ABC 2011 My Favorite Assignment: Let the speaker beware...

(cross-cultural communication, non-verbal communication, active learning)

Anne Bradstreet Grinols, Baylor University

“The meanings are not in the words; they are in us.” S. I. Hayakawa

True also for non-verbal communication!

Directions:

I. Set-up Announce a role-play exercise.

One volunteer leaves the room, stays close but out of earshot.

Tell the remaining students they inhabit a different planet, have a totally different culture:

They are hospitable.

They are fun-loving and like to play games.

They are gifted in language and can understand English.

They are mute.

Nodding their heads means yes. Shaking head side-to-side means no. (Try it out.)

Establish they have a gift to give the other visitor (the volunteer outside the room.)

This is something you have brought to the class and kept out of sight until now.

(Example: Small item with school logo (pen or notepad), package of M&Ms, etc)

Place the item in the room, on a student's desk, in plain sight, so all know where it is.



Ask if they are ready. They should shake their heads signifying yes. Reiterate that they should not respond to questions until they are sure how to respond “the new way,” since it won't be intuitive: it is crucial that the group does not send a mixed message. *Suggest you will stand behind the volunteer, when he/she returns, to give the correct response. (You must be correct!)*

II. Role-play Call the volunteer back in. Explain to him/her that you both are visitors to this new planet, “going where no man has gone before,” and you have found this group of inhabitants. Explain their attributes, described above. Then step back as the volunteer begins guessing where the object is and the other students respond non-verbally only, with nods and shakes of heads. *(If you can, nod or shake your head appropriately, from behind the volunteer, to help students.)*

Invariably, the volunteer student will assume that a nod means yes, and a shake means no. When he/she is totally confused (if he/she thinks success was reached by guessing something and seeing people nod, step in to say that it's not the object), ask: “What are you assuming?” Guide the volunteer to the right answer and suggest beginning again. If necessary, offer additional suggestion: “Ask them a question for which you know the answer.”

III. Resolution Continue the exercise until the student finds the object. Lead the class in applause, offer congratulations. *(It is best to have the volunteer keep the item. It is small but symbolic, and if anyone has been feeling sorry for the volunteer, this gesture will be appreciated. It will also encourage future volunteering in your class!)*

IV. Follow-up Ask the class what the problem was. Ask them how difficult it was to give the “right” response, which is the opposite from what is normal. Give time for several to reply, leading into a discussion of how hard it is to act differently than one is used to, even though you know better. Apply to the difficulties of cross-cultural communication. Emphasize the importance of avoiding assumptions in communication, especially (but not only) across cultures. Provide real-world examples during discussion, e.g. Japanese head-nod during negotiation may mean merely polite acknowledgment, not agreement.