

Plain English

By: Robin Pascoe

An ad appeared recently in an English-language paper in Asia seeking students interested in learning Plain English. Readers found it odd that it was directed at people who could not only already speak the language, but could converse in no other.

An expatriate woman intrigued by the unusual ad called the phone number listed in the newspaper and was surprised to hear a deep, melodious male voice pick up at the other end. She wondered if she had accidentally stumbled upon a little known school for the training of broadcast voices.

"I'm calling about your ad in the paper," she began tentatively.

"Yes....," said deep voice. "How might I help you?"

"Well, that's what I would like to know. What exactly is the course you are offering?"

"I offer a one week class in Plain English. I teach people to say what they mean to say."

The woman was baffled. Trying to keep her tone polite and interested, she asked "What do you mean? I'm not sure I'm clear about it."

"You just demonstrated an example of what I teach. Instead of asking me straight out if I'm some kind of lunatic ripping off people with phony English classes, you are trying to remain polite. I teach people to speak directly what's on their mind. My clientele typically consists of expatriates exhausted from the tension of being polite and diplomatic."

"It sounds to me like you teach people how to be rude to one another."

"You sound like you have potential! Seriously, some might see it that way. I prefer to use the word 'honest'. Are you interested in signing up for my next class?"

"I couldn't," she responded, with regret hard to mask.

"And why not?"

"My husband is a diplomat. I would never be able to use any of your lessons."

Nevertheless, when the course was due to begin, the woman showed up dutifully at the makeshift classroom which was in the man's hotel room as he was not a permanent resident. She was surprised to see only three other 'students' and shocked further when she realized she knew everyone present. Fortunately, there was no one in the room she wished to speak to in Plain English.

The teacher explained that he was a retired diplomat who had spent years keeping his words inside until he was almost driven mad with frustration. Upon leaving foreign service, his wife had come up with the idea of his traveling around and offering the course as a way of helping others.

"As a way of loosening everyone's tongues, I suggest we go around the room and have each person say why they enrolled in my class."

"I thought it would be interesting," said the first 'student', a young man who was obviously new to overseas life.

"I wanted to broaden my horizons," said an older woman, who added, "and the bridge classes were already full."

"My wife sent me," confessed a distinguished looking man. "She says I've been an ambassador so long I'm positively obtuse."

The diplomatic wife wasn't sure what to say. The teacher was looking at her, waiting. Finally she blurted out: "I want to learn to say NO. Can you teach me that?"

"Excellent, my dear! I felt from our phone conversation that you would be a promising student. I was not mistaken. Let's begin. I can see from your responses that I have my work cut out for me!"

After a shaky start, it didn't take long for the students to begin opening up in their classroom conversations. But all were concerned that in the real world of cocktail parties, office politics, and community organizations, they would retreat back into their tactful, yet frustrated selves.

"We're extremely grateful for what you have given us," said the diplomatic wife when the week of classes was over. "But the question we all have is: How do we keep up our Plain English vocabulary? Won't we lose it when we revert back to polite double speak?"

"Ya," piped up the young man. "Unless we can keep this up, you are nothing more than a rip off artist. We should demand our money back."

"Remember our lesson about being rude?" the teacher asked the young man. "There is a big difference between Plain English and out and out impolite or inconsiderate behavior," he admonished.

"So what can we do?" they all asked unison.

"Shall I speak plainly?"

"Please do."

"It's your problem. Not mine. Thank you very much for coming this week."

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