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Deciphering B-Jargon

International MBAs "hammer out deals" and "get called on the carpet."

by [Alison Damast](#)

As a Columbia B-school student back in the mid-1990s, Tracy Yun found herself perplexed by basic business world jargon she encountered in the classroom and in the corporate world. The textbook English she had learned while growing up in China left her at a loss when confronted with phrases like "called on the carpet" and "bucking for a raise."

"It took me a while to get up to speed in perfecting my English," said Yun, now executive director of Manhattan Review, a New York management- and career-training center. "At the time, I thought it would be great if someone could teach me a whole spectrum of these business words."

Yun is helping students now facing similar quandaries by teaming up with [Columbia Business School](#) to offer an English Language Skills and Cultural Interaction Boot Camp. She designed the program along with Joern Meissner, another former international Columbia student and PhD graduate of the school. It was an online pilot last year and was offered for the first time this August as a pre-orientation class.

Armed with electronic dictionaries on the first day of the session, about a dozen students from Argentina, Japan, Spain, and South Korea pored through a textbook called *Smart Business Talk* filled with hundreds of idioms and business slang terms.

With instructor John Beer's guidance, students analyzed the meaning behind expressions like "working stiff" and "hammer out a deal," and practiced using them in sentences and mock business scenarios, including one where students staged a scene asking their boss for a raise.

"You tell me I'm dead wood, and I tell you I work as hard as a dog. I've been jumping through hoops for you," said Sara Carner, a first-year student from Spain, during a mock employee-review scenario.

Her classmate, Kyong-Taek Lee, a first-year student from South Korea playing her employer, quickly put Carner in her place. "You think you work like a dog, but I think you need to work your fingers to the bone to get promoted," Lee shot back.

Columbia officials said they hope that these expressions will come in handy for students as they interview on campus for summer internships and later, when they enter the workforce.

"At the beginning, students have to be encouraged to do things that are not in their cultural norms or comfort zones," said Judith Kostin, director of corporate strategy and international advising at the school's MBA career-services office. "What we're trying to do is give them a little edge and make them feel comfortable."