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M.B.A. TRACK

 By RONALD
 ALSOP

How Students From Abroad Learn to Talk the Talk

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Lisa Yuan, a first-year M.B.A. student at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, spoke English on the job when she lived in China and felt pretty competent. But she says she now realizes "there is much room for me to improve."

After being tested on her English proficiency at UNC, she decided she should take a new class for international M.B.A. students to "get rid of my accent" and sharpen her pronunciation of certain letters and sounds such as "th" and "v." "Because English is the language of business, I want to be as close to a native speaker as possible," says Ms. Yuan, who hopes to land a job in the U.S. after graduation.


North Carolina's new strategy for Ms. Yuan and other international students is early intervention. The career-services office at UNC's Kenan-Flagler Business School saw too many students discover in job interviews that their English simply didn't measure up to recruiters' expectations. At that point, it was often too late for them to significantly improve their fluency before graduation.

Now, North Carolina is rolling out a program called Honing Executive English Language Skills, or Heels (a catchy acronym to Tar Heels fans). It requires all of its foreign M.B.A. students -- more than a quarter of the class -- to take an oral and written test when they arrive on campus. The students are rated on a nine-point scale based on their accent, pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and other factors. To boost their scores, students can pay a fee to take special classes taught by linguists that focus on speaking English in a business context.

"For any international student looking to become part of corporate America, communication skills are as crucial, if not more so, than technical skills," says Ayush Kaushal, a second-year M.B.A. student at UNC who is from India. "Thanks to the Heels program I have become much more self-aware. Because of my accent, I realize I need to reduce my pace of speaking so people don't get lost. I also need to talk more loudly and stop using fillers like 'umm' when I pause to think."

Despite the current high demand for M.B.A. graduates, many international students still struggle to get a job

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offer -- or even an interview. At Kenan-Flagler, for instance, only about 40% of the recruiters will meet with foreign nationals. The chief reasons for such resistance: the limited number of U.S. work visas and language deficiencies.

Business schools can't do much about visas, but they can try to overcome language barriers. North Carolina is sending audiotapes of its international students to recruiters and counting on their feedback to establish benchmarks for English proficiency for specific industries. For example, students might receive a rating of five out of nine on the English test and learn that they must raise it to seven to be hired by a technology company or to eight to satisfy a bank's requirements.

Kenan-Flagler's career-services office finds that English fluency is especially important in investment banking, consulting and consumer-products marketing. But other industries expect fluency in English as well. "We're a global company and we look to foreign students for their international business knowledge and cultural experiences," says Clive Pinto, human-resources manager for W.R. Grace, a chemical manufacturer. "But our ability to capitalize on their knowledge depends on their English proficiency."

In the HEELS classes at North Carolina, students are grouped by their native regions, such as Western Europe, East Asia, South Asia, Africa or Latin America, because they tend to share similar problems with accent and pronunciation. The program also addresses nonverbal communication and body language, which may vary from culture to culture. The classes attempt to change behavior that might be misinterpreted by U.S. managers, co-workers or clients. "For example, a U.S. recruiter would expect direct eye contact and a firm handshake," says Mindy Storrie, interim director of Kenan-Flagler's career management center, "but that isn't a universal norm in other countries' business dealings."

In addition to the English classes, North Carolina offers courses for international M.B.A. students on American culture -- from sports and entertainment to the origin of slang expressions -- and on U.S. business communication, including practice exercises for impromptu speeches, team presentations, boardroom pitches and employee performance reviews.

While North Carolina's courses are among the most comprehensive, other schools are also expanding programs to help foreign students prepare for careers in the U.S. The University of Rochester's Simon Graduate School of Business, where nearly half of the M.B.A. class is international, offers an English-language and U.S.-culture program that includes language instruction and trips to museums, theaters and sports events.

At the University at Buffalo, there are English as a Second Language classes, as well as opportunities for foreign nationals to practice pitching themselves to recruiters at mock career fairs and in interview workshops. "The average recruiter is going to decide in 30 seconds whether a student has the communication skills to make it in his organization," says Paul Allaire, an assistant dean at Buffalo. "We want to give our international students a fighting chance to compete."

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