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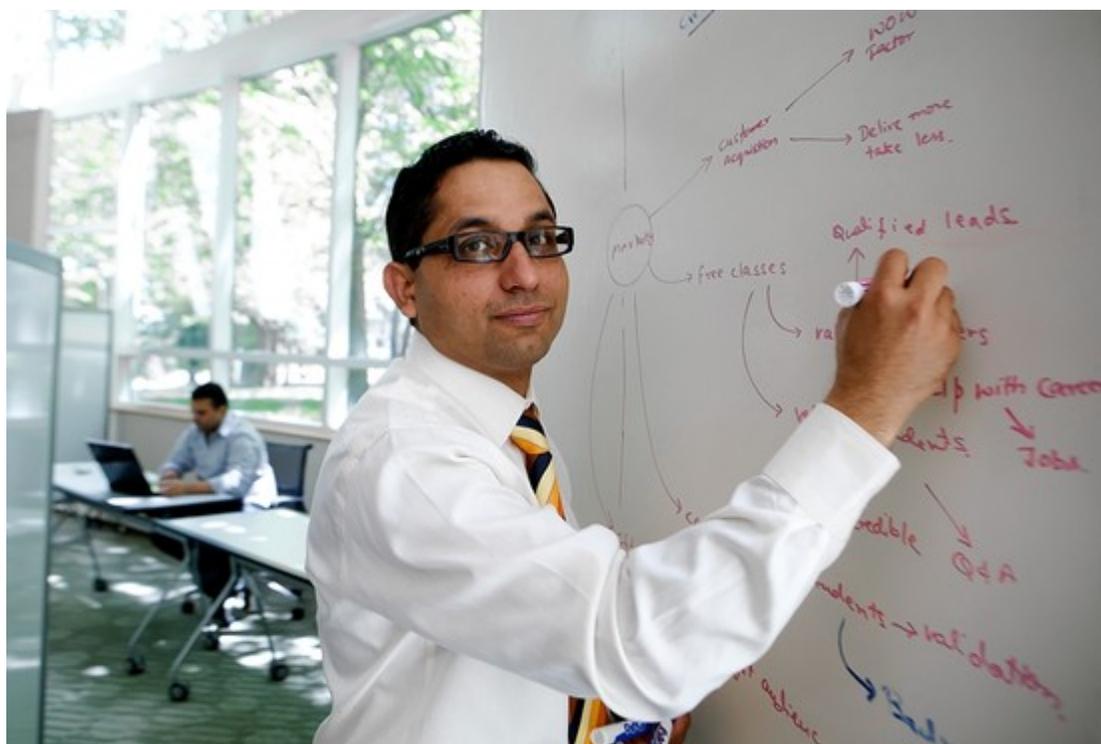
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Mastering the Finer Points of American Slang

By ALINA DIZIK



Jessica Scranton for The Wall Street Journal

Entrepreneur Gaurav Dhy, in Wellesley, Mass., has found informal small talk to be an important part of doing business in the U.S.

Gaurav Dhy studied English when growing up in India, but soon after moving to Boston five years ago, he realized he had a lot to learn about the way Americans talk. Some phrases that left him wondering included "I'm all set" and "I'm peachy."

Most meetings "start with chitchat," says the 39-year-old co-founder of LearnFunGo, a discount software-learning website, who moved to Boston five years ago. "And you're like 'Hmm, I don't get it.' You're left out."

While learning American idioms has always been challenging, texting, email and social networks have generated a tidal wave of new slang and abbreviations in English. It is difficult enough to decode "OMG" (Oh my God) "BFF" (best friends forever) and "GTG" (got to go), let alone understand why it's funny to call something a "fail" (but not a "failure").

"Nowadays, peppering our speech with nonstandard English is being a regular Joe," says Jason Riggle, assistant professor of sociology at the University of Chicago.

Getting comfortable with slang is essential for building relationships and communicating at work. For a manager, relying on formal English can create distance. "Without [knowing] idioms, they look at you and say, 'Oh my God, who is this woman?' " says Vladimira Gueren, 51, a former chief financial officer in Palm Coast, Fla., who moved from the Czech Republic almost four years ago.

Textbooks aren't much use for managers trying to keep up with viral expressions emerging in music and videos, says Amy Gillett, author of English slang and idiom vocabulary books including "Speak Business English Like an American." Many professionals don't realize they need help until they arrive here, says Ms. Gillett, who also is a director of executive education at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

Another hurdle: choosing which words and phrases are appropriate for the speaker and the situation. In her books, Ms. Gillett presents terms like "slack off" and "stressed out." But she says she doesn't want to teach idioms that are too cutting-edge, such as using "sick" to mean "cool" or "epic" to mean "awesome."

Over the past 10 years, instructors at Berlitz Language Schools have been asked to put more emphasis on the context in which particular terms are used, says Shawn Scott, North America's director of instruction at Berlitz International, which runs schools around the world. "With slang and idioms, [learners] can read it but don't understand the meaning," says Mr. Scott.

At Kennesaw State University in Georgia, the Intensive English Program doesn't teach a slang expression until it is in use for more than one generation, says David Johnson, a professor of English and director of the program. "We teach things like 'home run', which has staying power," he says.

At times, the slang terms promulgated in classrooms can be outdated. A recent Berlitz English as a Second Language class in Chicago taught students the meanings of "skedaddle," which dates back to the Civil War, and "Valley girl," from the 1980s.

One way to learn the latest in conversational English: Rana Al Ruhaily, 29, a doctor who moved to Chicago from Saudi Arabia last year, says she and her husband consider the show "Family Guy" to be required TV viewing, to help them fill in gaps.

John Hayden started English, Baby!, a website based in Portland, Ore., to help nonnative speakers keep up with slang. The 10-person staff scours celebrity interviews to add to its list of commonly spoken phrases. Posts about "never say never" (from a Justin Bieber song) and "slack off" have been some of the most popular, Mr. Hayden says.

One trouble spot he sees: "families" of slang words used in many different ways. "You can have a crush that you're crushing on, but you can't crush your crush," Mr. Hayden says. "See how that could get confusing?"

Even people who live overseas are eager to pick up American idioms. Jessica Beinecke reaches an audience of 8.5 million Chinese each week as host of OMG! Meiyu, a Voice of America Web show that Ms. Beinecke, 25, hosts in Mandarin. Recent expressions include "eye gunk" and "wandering eyes." But students often find it hard to understand which phrases are age-appropriate, she says. "I'm worried that [I'm] creating this audience in China who is going to speak like a 25-year-old blonde woman," says Ms. Beinecke.

Jennifer Powell-Lunder, a clinical psychologist and author of "Teenage as Second Language: A Parent's Guide to Becoming Bilingual," says midcareer professionals must be especially vigilant about recognizing when they sound like teen wannabes. "Adults will start speaking this kind of language without really grasping the source," she says. For example, she says, adults who use the word "phat" will be heard as saying "overweight," rather than cool.

Jie Teng, a 28-year-old business-school student from Hunan Province, China, is reluctant to use slang, because it's so easy to mess up. She has sworn off "hook up," which she recently used to mean "preoccupied," not realizing that it has other meanings. "I used it the wrong way and it was kind of embarrassing," she says.

Five Terms to Love and Five to Use With Caution—Literally, Dude

Here is some of the slang terms that students of English most want to learn and some of the words that are the most difficult—or risky—to use.

The Most Popular Slang

Dude—This term—as in "Hey, dude!" and "Dude, what's up?"—has had an unusually long shelf life for slang. "Nonnative speakers are sometimes curious if there is a female version of 'dude,'" says Amy Gillett, author of "Speak Business English Like an American." "But these versions —'dudette' and 'dudess'—never caught on."

Chilling—Hanging out, doing nothing. "Nonnative speakers who strive to sound cool will learn quickly to drop the "g" on the end," says Ms. Gillett.

Psyched—"It's easy to use—you can basically drop it in anywhere you would normally use 'excited,' says John Hayden, cofounder of a website called English, Baby!

Man up—To "be strong, do what is expected of you." "This one is popular because it's current—you hear celebrities use it often," says Mr. Hayden.

Big deal—To native speakers, this phrase may not even sound like slang, but Mr. Hayden calls it "gateway slang": "You can learn it and use it easily without much risk of misuse."

The Trickiest Slang

What's Up?/Wassup?—In its shortest form ('sup?), it can be hard to understand. It's also hard to answer, says Ms. Gillett. Students "need to learn the acceptable replies—not much, nothing much—instead of replying, 'Fine,' 'Good' or 'OK.'"

Shut up!—This phrase can be rude. But "with a smile and rising intonation, it could mean 'I don't believe you' or 'Really? Tell me more,' " says Ms. Gillett. Or if you stress the 'shut' and stretch it out, it could mean, 'No way!' or 'That's hard to believe!'"

Freak out, freak—You can freak, freak someone out or have a freak-out, but you can't have a freak. "The flexibility of this term makes it hard to know where its limits are," says Mr. Hayden.

Hook up—This term shouldn't be used in any kind of romantic overture, as it can refer to many kinds of activities, including kissing and sex. "Nonnative speakers are always heartened to learn that native speakers don't really know what it means either," says Ms. Gillett.

Literally—While this can mean truthfully or without exaggeration, English students learn it can be used to exaggerate. Example: "We have literally been waiting for a table at this restaurant for a million years," says Mr. Hayden.

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