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Popularity and Familiarity of Slang among ESL Students

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Abstract: Slang is a set of colloquial words or phrases in a language. It is the use of highly informal words and expressions that are not considered standard in the speaker's dialect or language. Slang is very often colloquial; the language and dialect tend to be specific to a particular territory and it is a central part of young's experience but contrary to many adults perception of slang as more or less uniform "Youth language". Though, slangs are language and culture specific but they are often transmitted from one culture and language to another. Recent electronic communications contribute a lot in this process. The aim of this study was to show that whether Malaysian youth use English slang in their language. The two major objectives were: to illustrate to what degree Malaysian youth are familiar with slang and to examine what kind of slang they use more in compare with other kinds of slang. A test consists of 20 slang items was administered to 60 students. The respondents were in final semester of bachelor of English language at UPM. The data obtained from the study was coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The analysis of data showed that the internet slang, abbreviations slang and movie slang are used frequently by youth. It seems that they are familiar with these sorts of slang. The reasons can be because of using internet and social media nowadays, another reason can be media which has the most important role in this case.

Key words: Slang, second language acquisition, youth language, colloquial

INTRODUCTION

This study shows the familiarity of slang, particularly American slangs, amongst Malaysian undergraduate students of a public university. English language is constantly changing and slang is increasingly becoming a greater part of our shifting linguistic terrain. Most new words, in fact, come from slang. In the recently released 2000 edition of "The Random House Webster's Collegiate Dictionary", there are 303 new words among the 200,000-plus definitions. Most come from slang, often seen as the language of youth. Slang, an ever-changing set of Colloquial words and phrases, generally considered distinct from and socially lower than the standard language. Slang is used to establish or reinforce social identity and cohesiveness, especially within a group or with a trend or fashion in society at large. It occurs in all languages and the existence of a short-lived vocabulary of this sort within a language is probably as old as language itself.

Colloquial speech and slang seem to be one of the more difficult areas for achieving native-like language competence in the acquisition of a second language (L2), though very few studies have been conducted on this topic.

Exploring colloquial speech, slang and culturally conditioned vocabulary is very important for the field of

second language acquisition, if the goal of the learner is native like fluency and competence. Slang is an important part of a language and the comprehension of this type of language may lead to a greater grasp of many relevant aspects of the culture. Slang is a social phenomenon and its acquisition could help L2 learners become more comfortable and competent socially in the target language. Xu and McAlpine (2008) reported that second language learner learned more colloquial speech that pertained to their lives. Thus, the acquisition of slang could promote a more socially exciting environment to the L2 students, causing their motivation and desire to learn the language to grow and thus, more overall success in the acquisition of the L2.

In 1938, slang was defined as: Coming from money, sex and intoxicating liquor add in drugs and very little has changed, nor is it likely to. Standard English has most of the words it needs; slang continues to expand. The patterns will remain, the need for slang to retain even a short-term secrecy means that the lists of synonyms will keep expanding.

Slang refers to speech expressions used by a speech community (e.g., teenagers, criminals, etc.) that wishes to show its attachment to a favorable social identity; a usage which is not often approved of by other social groups (Shahraki and Rasekh, 2011). It is a style of usage that is not acceptable in situations outside the group and is

unfavorable to the general population. Hudson (2000) believes that slang starts out as clever alternative ways of saying things which could otherwise be expressed in polite ways. On the other hand, Allan and Burridge (2009) argued that the politeness of this category of language is wedded to context, time and place. Eble (1996) argued that slang is an ever changing set of colloquial words and phrases that speakers use to establish or reinforce social identity or cohesiveness within a group or with a trend or fashion in society at large. The existence of vocabulary of this sort within a language is possibly as old as language itself, for slang seems to be part of any language used in ordinary interaction by a community large enough and diverse enough to have identifiable subgroup.

Some sociolinguistic and lexicographic research on teenage and young adult slang (Eble, 1996; Charkova, 2007; Munro, 1989; Sutton, 1995) has documented the wealth of lexical resources available to speakers in the creation and display of youth identity. Yet, these studies which rely on written self-reports of usage, do not always make clear to what degree their data derive from language ideologies and to what degree they represent actual patterns of slang use; respondents' stereotypes, attitudes and ideologies of how slang is used are often presented unproblematically as reflective of linguistic practice. It is therefore, advisable to read these research reports not as straightforward documentations of slang use but mainly for the valuable information they yield about language ideology.

Such studies, given their methods and goals, also offer up ideologies of their own. Primary among these is the representation of slang as a unifying practice that consolidates youth identity in opposition to adults. Like most ideologies, this one has a factual basis. It has been widely observed that slang, at least beginning in the latter half of the twentieth century, has served as one strategy among others for establishing and maintaining a teenage cohort separate from adults on the one hand and children on the other. From this perspective, slang is a kind of "Anti-language", to use (Halliday, 1976) term, or, by Morgan (1993) revision of Halliday, (1976) a "counterlanguage," through which a shared youth identity is reproduced against a dominant norm. But in highlighting this function of slang, sociolinguists have downplayed the ways in which it divides as well as unifies its users.

Richter (2006) in India has done a research on Indian students' use of slang. She also investigated the influences of slang on society. She has used the descriptive method and used interviews and questionnaires to collect the data, without considering the secondary sources such as books, articles and most

important thing, Internet. Actually, she investigated the specific slang expressions used by Indians students on a University campus. All the slangs were in the Indian language and she gave the definitions in English. Also she does not consider different kinds of slang such as internet slang, movies slang, street slang, etc. She focused on campus slang at a university in India only.

In Malaysian universities, most of undergraduate students speak English. Thus, as English is the language of the computer and the Internet and as well the language of Hollywood movies, it is important for students to be familiar with contemporary English and slang will be a significant part of this. Acquiring the colloquial speech of a discourse community is crucial for second language learners who wish to achieve native-like proficiency in the target language of such community. However, research conducted on slang amongst undergraduate students seems very limited. The majority of materials available in this area are dictionaries or thesauruses that list slang examples in a given language but often do not define the specific terms of colloquial speech and slang. Thus, this study was conducted to begin an investigation into whether Malaysian students are familiar with slang or not.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this study, a pilot-test was used to establish the validity and reliability of the instrument. While validity refers to whether or not an instrument measures, what it is supposed to measure, reliability refers to how consistently the instrument yields the same results over repeated trials. The pilot-testing helped to determine if the tests are straightforward and easily understood by the respondents. In this test, both correct and incorrect answers were important to researcher. Because the correct answers tell the researcher that students are familiar with slang and incorrect answers mention that students are not familiar with this slang. The test for this study consisted of 20 items. Slang items for this study were collected from <http://www.intranet.csupomona.edu/~jasanders/slang/index.html> where top 20 slang of each year are mentioned. Then the selected items were checked with the third edition of Dictionary of American slang and colloquial Expressions to be sure about the accuracy of meaning of slangs.

According to Tuckman (1978), the item in a pilot-test would be re-tested to find out its clarity and distribution. First, the pilot-test was administrated to 10 students: 4 Iranians, 2 Jordanians, 1 Bangladeshi and 3 Malaysians. All of them were students at UPM. The age of respondents ranged from 20-30 years and the average was 25.8 years. In the pilot-test, there were 20 items. Each item

has four possible responses. After analyzing the first data, the results showed that students are familiar with slang and the test can be administered to the participants.

Respondents' frequencies of use of slangs in English were obtained through a pilot-test. The instrument consisted of 20 items on slangs in the form of multiple choices. Respondents were requested to report their frequency of use of these items to know whether they were familiar with these slangs and if they use these slangs in their use of English. The responses of the respondents were computed through SPSS.

Participants: The respondents for the study were 60 final semester Bachelor of English Language at UPM. The 60 respondents comprised both male and female students. Respondents of this study were from both male and female groups. The percentage of male respondents was 15 whereas, the percentage of female was 85. Since this study did not aim to explore influence of gender on the use of slang, variation of respondents on gender was not considered important. They were not given a specified time to respond to the test. This was to enable the respondents to respond to the test in a very comfortable and convenient manner.

Statistical analysis: All the data obtained from the study was coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). All the items were divided into variables for data processing. Each respondent was presented with 20 items, where each item had 4 options from "a-d". From those options, only one of them was the correct answer to the question. Data was then coded as "1" representing option "a", "2" for option "b", "3" for option "c" and "4" for option "d". Frequency analysis was done to show the occurrence of valid and invalid answers and distribution of answers in the sample. While, number of valid cases "N" was controlled closely, their mean, median and standard deviation was observed to make sure all cases are analyzed correctly. Also the attempts were made to show the most and the least familiar slangs. The data was analyzed through a linguistic point of view.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following sections discuss the frequencies of use of these slangs by the respondents.

Slang No. 1 (Yep (yup): You, yes, strong, below): The meaning of this slang is yes, a positive answer, originally in 1960s entered to language. It is very common in everyday language as majority of people use this slang in their conversations. Respondents' frequency of use of

the slang 'Yep' is presented in Table 1. Of the total respondents, 98.3% reported correct answer and 1.7% reported incorrect answer to mark their familiarity with this slang. Since, majority of the respondents (98.3%) chose the correct answer, it seems that they are familiar with this slang and they might use this slang in their use of English. Respondents irrespective of gender and nationality reported to be familiar with this slang which indicates that this particular slang is used across the gender, nationality and culture.

Slang No. 2 (Baby: Child, infant, young child, somebody you love (your love)): Baby in slang means sweetheart, somebody you love. Its origin belongs to 1940's. Respondents' frequency of use of the slang 'Baby' is presented in Table 1. Of the total respondents, 35% reported correct answer and 65% reported incorrect answer to mark their familiarity with this slang. Since, majority of the respondents (65%) chose the incorrect answer, it seems that they are not familiar with this slang and they might not use this slang frequently in their use of English. There should be some reasons that respondents were not familiar with this slang. One of them may be related to their culture. Most of the respondents are Malaysian and as the results tell the researcher, this slang is not a common slang in society of Malaysia and among the students. The other reason can be because of not being so intimate to each other to call each other like that, then normally they were not familiar with this slang.

Slang No. 3 (Chicken: Coward, white meat, ugly, bad): This slang refers to a person who is coward. This slang also entered the language in 1940s. Since that year, it could stay as a common slang so far. Respondents' frequency of use of the slang 'Chicken' is presented in Table 1. Of the total respondents, 23.3% reported correct answer and 76.7% reported incorrect answer to mark their familiarity with this slang. Since, majority of the respondents (76.7%) chose the incorrect answer, it seems that they are not familiar with this slang and they might not use this slang frequently in their use of English.

Slang No. 4 (Big mouth: Important, young man, silent, talks too much): Big mouth means a talkative person and it refers to 1980's. Respondents' frequency of use of the slang 'Big mouth' is presented in Table 1. Of the total respondents, 71.7% reported correct answer and 28.3% reported incorrect answer to mark their familiarity with this

Table 1: Respondents' frequencies of use of slang No. 1-5

Slangs	Total valid	Valid (%)	Total invalid	Invalid (%)
Slang No. 1	59	98.3	1	1.7
Slang No. 2	21	35.0	39	65
Slang No. 3	14	23.3	46	76.7
Slang No. 4	43	71.7	17	28.3
Slang No. 5	53	88.3	7	11.7

slang. Since, majority of the respondents (71.7%) chose the correct answer, it seems that they are familiar with this slang and they might use this slang in their use of English.

Slang No. 5 (Cool: Coldness, great, crazy, lazy): Cool in slang means excellent or great. It refers to 1950s. Respondents' frequency of use of the slang 'Cool' is presented in Table 1. Of the total respondents, 88.3% reported correct answer and 11.7% reported incorrect answer to mark their familiarity with this slang. Since, majority of the respondents (88.3%) chose the correct answer, it seems that they are familiar with this slang and they might use this slang in their use of English. It's accepted by young culture to use it. The main reason for being so popular can be media.

Slang No. 6 (Gonna: Well, going to, displace, want): The original form of gonna is going to, normally it is accepted by people to use it in slang are and according to our results the answer of being with this slang is positive. Normally young people use this form of slang in the internet and writing sms. Respondents' frequency of use of the slang 'Gonna' is presented in Table 2. Of the total respondents, 88.3% reported correct answer and 11.7% reported incorrect answer to mark their familiarity with this slang.

Slang No. 7 (Gotta: Got to, forgotten, unable to do, shortage): The same as the previous slang this one is a reduction. The meaning of this word is got to, must and need to but in the area of slang, people use it as goota. Respondents' frequency of use of the slang 'Gotta' is presented in Table 2. Of the total respondents, 95% reported correct answer and 5% reported incorrect answer to mark their familiarity with this slang. Since, majority of the respondents (95%) chose the correct answer, it seems that they are familiar with this slang and they might use this slang in their use of English.

Slang No. 8 (Wanna: Request, want to, lust, dream): Want to is the complete form of wanna as a slang. This slang is very common as accepted by youth culture and they use it frequently in their conversations. Respondents' frequency of use of the slang 'Wanna' is presented in Table 2. Of the total respondents, 95% reported correct answer and 5% reported incorrect answer to mark their familiarity with this slang.

Slang No. 9 (LOL (short form, Internet abbreviation): laughing in a loud voice (many laughs), long life, happy, lonely): LOL (also written lol) is an abbreviation for "Laugh out loud", "Laughing out loud" "Lots of laughter", "Lots of laughs". LOL is a common element of Internet slang used, historically, on Usenet. It is similar to

the acronyms which are used to communicate a higher degree of amusement. Evidence of this phrase has been located as far back as a Usenet posting on January 17, 1990. Respondents' frequency of use of the slang 'LOL' is presented in Table 3. Of the total respondents, 76.7% reported correct answer and 23.3% reported incorrect answer to mark their familiarity with this slang. Since, majority of the respondents (76.7 %) chose the correct answer.

Slang No. 10 (ASAP: As soon as possible, see you later, as a problem, possibility): ASAP is an abbreviation which means as soon as possible. This is internet slang as well. It's very common nowadays in the net and the high percent of correct answers confirms the claim. Most of young people, especially students use this slang in their email and in the chatting as well in their sms. Respondents' frequency of use of the slang 'ASAP' is presented in Table 3. All the respondents, 100% reported correct answer to mark their familiarity with this slang. Since, all the respondents (100%) chose the correct answer.

Slang No. 11 (Brb (Internet slang): Be right back, I'm very busy, be great, be good): BRB is an abbreviation for 'be right back'. It's very popular slang among students. Normally they use it in the chartroom and email and on the hand phone for writing an SMS.

Slang No. 12 (B4N: (internet slang)Before, bye, bye for now, be right back): B4N is another abbreviation in the area of slang. Again, the area of use of this slang is on the net specially during chatting and email. It's a very popular slang among the students nowadays which started in 1990s. Respondents' frequency of use of the slang 'B4N' is presented in Table 3.

Slang No. 13 (What's up? What's that?, What a pity?, What's the problem?, What's going on? (How are you?) This slang means, what's going on? What's new? How do you feel?): In everyday conversation we use this slang. Intentionally or not we are using slang anyway. This slang refers to 1940s. Respondents' frequency of use of the slang 'What's up' is presented in Table 4.

Table 2: Respondents' frequencies of use of slang No. 6-8

Slangs	Total valid	Valid (%)	Total invalid	Invalid (%)
Slang No. 6	53	88.3	7	11.7
Slang No. 7	57	95	3	5
Slang No. 8	57	95	3	5

Table 3: Respondents' frequencies of use of slang No. 9-12

Slangs	Total valid	Valid (%)	Total invalid	Invalid (%)
Slang No. 9	46	76.7	14	23.3
Slang No. 10	60	100	00	00
Slang No. 11	60	100	00	00
Slang No. 12	53	88.3	7	11.7

Slang No. 14 (My bad: Goodness, my mistake, silly, my favorite): My bad as a slang means, my mistake. It refers to 1970s and so far could stay as a common slang among the people especially young people. Respondents' frequency of use of the slang 'My bad' is presented in Table 4. Of the total respondents, 51.7% reported correct answer and 50.3% reported incorrect answer to mark their familiarity with this slang. Since, about half of the respondents chose the correct answer and half of them chose incorrect, it seems that respondents are partially familiar with this slang and they might use this slang partially in their use of English.

Slang No. 15 (Pic: Computer, picture, show, icon): Another abbreviation in the slang area is pic which is normally used as a picture. This slang is very popular internet slang. Young people mostly use it in their email and chat. Respondents' frequency of use of the slang 'Pic' is presented in Table 4.

Slang No. 16 (Dude: Good, cool guy, adult male, ugly): Dude is an American slang which means a cool guy. It refers to 1950s and still young people use it often. As this slang is an American and normally used in that society, we can see that it's not so popular here among the students. Respondents' frequency of use of the slang 'Dude' is presented in Table 4.

Slang No. 17 (Oh Jesus Christ: Jesus, message, Expression of surprise, good): Oh Jesus Christ shows the surprise. It can be a movie slang as mostly can be heard in the movies and can be mentioned as media slang. Because of Western and Hollywood movies this slang is popular now but if we consider it as a cultural or if we relate it to religion it cannot be a popular slang here in Malaysia.

Slang No. 18 (Oh Shit: Meaningless, oh no, damn, deceive, kind): It is a Slang in the area of media which means, 'oh no or damn'. It's popular because of the media and TV channels. As the percentage of correct answer says it is accepted by youth culture and counts as a popular slang among students and people. Respondents' frequency of use of the slang 'Oh Shit' is presented in Table 5.

Slang No. 19 (Homey: A friend or buddy, difficult, cruel, like a home): Homey means a friend or a buddy. It refers to 1980s. It's not a very common slang among the

students as the results tell us. Respondents' frequency of use of the slang 'Homey' is presented in Table 5. Of the total respondents, 25% reported correct answer and 75% reported incorrect answer to mark their familiarity with this slang. Since, majority of the respondents (75%) chose the incorrect answer, it seems that they are not familiar with this slang and they might not use this slang frequently in their use of English.

Slang No. 20 (Oh my goodness: Expression of surprise or shock, very bad, good, kindness): 'Oh my Goodness' shows the surprise or shock. According to amount of correct answer it can be mentioned as popular slang among students. The effect of popularity can be the media, especially Western media. Respondents' frequency of use of the slang 'Oh my goodness' is presented in Table 5.

It can be seen in Table 1-5 that majority of the respondents were familiar with most of these slangs. Only in three slangs, Slangs No. 2, 3 and 19, respondents were not found acceptably familiar.

By nature, slang is ever changing resulting from different factors such as socio-cultural changes and advancement, technological development and mass media, the process of acculturation and globalization, evolution and natural development of language. Language by nature is dynamic. Every language is changing, modifying and developing with the change of social structured, cultural values and norms, communicative needs, behavior and strategies, mode of communication, etc., with the passage of time. As language evolution is a continuous process, words modifying in this structure and function, some of them are dying out because of no or less currency in their use among the members of the speech community and at the same time, many new words are coming into scene and enriching the word-stock of languages. The new words and phrases are adding to the list of words through different word formation processes.

Naturally, slang seems to be language and cultural specific. But with the advancement of electronic communication, internet and cell phone in particular, slang of our language and culture passes to another language and culture. In the multicultural and multilingual settings, the frequency of mixing up of slang into language is high.

Slang, a type of word is also made through different process of word formation. Some of them have a very short span of existence whereas, some are as old as the language itself. Slang is generally perceived as the

Table 4: Respondents' frequencies of use of slang No. 13-16

Slangs	Total valid	Valid (%)	Total invalid	Invalid (%)
Slang No. 13	50	83.3	10	16.7
Slang No. 14	31	51.7	29	50.3
Slang No. 15	60	100	00	00
Slang No. 16	32	53.3	28	46.7

Table 5: Respondents' frequencies of use of slang No. 17-20

Slangs	Total valid	Valid (%)	Total invalid	Invalid (%)
Slang No. 17	57	95	3	5
Slang No. 18	60	100	00	00
Slang No. 19	15	25	45	75
Slang No. 20	53	88.3	7	11.7

language of the youth. It seems as a part of youth culture and styles. People of young generation use slang for multidimensional purposes. Sometimes slangs are used as secret code among the youth. When they want their speech, They should not be understood by the people of other generations. Sometimes slangs are used to make fun and enlightenment in the friendly discussion and gossip among the youth. The most important function of slang is identity marker. It identifies the youth from the other generations. In short, slang is an integral part of teenage communication. It gives them an identity of youth style of expression. Though, slangs are language and culture specific but they are often transmitted from one culture and language to another. Recent electronic communications contribute a lot in this process.

The results of this study showed that undergraduate students are familiar with the popular slang. The results of this study support the findings of the research conducted by Shahraki and Rasekh (2011). They explored the usage of slangs amongst the different age groups. Their study revealed that the usage of slang is popular amongst the teenager group and they are familiar with the slangs.

CONCLUSION

Slang of our language and culture may influence the other language and culture. This study examined whether the Malaysian undergraduates use slang. If they use, to what extent they are familiar with slang. This study also explored the sources of slang as Internet, books and papers, and media.

The analysis of data shows that Internet slang and abbreviations such as gonna, gotta, pic, B4N, BRB, LOL, ASAP and wanna are used frequently by youth generation. It seems that they are familiar with this sort of slang. On the other hand some slangs such as baby, chicken, my bad and dude could not attract the respondents' attention which means they are not familiar with this kind of slang in compare with Internet slang. As the study says they are also familiar with slangs like Oh shit! Oh my goodness! and Oh Jesus Christ!. We can hear this kind of slang normally in the movies. It can be a reason why they are familiar with this kind of slang. It shows the influence of media on youth generation language. As most of TV channels in Malaysia are American channels, it is predictable that youth generation be familiar with media slang or movie slang, which shows most of slang they use are American slang.

Based on the results, it is also evident that exposure to media sources such as television, movies and newspaper is also helpful for colloquial speech and slang comprehension. In a classroom setting teachers could integrate this type of media exposure to students. Identifying structure of the language through exercises

where the student is asked to underline or pick out phrasal colloquialisms could help the student's awareness of this type of speech. Above all, exposure is necessary for the acquisition of any type of speech, as well as colloquial speech. The participants of this study are in a situation where they are exposed to colloquial speech and slang because of their age and circumstances as college students. The best environment for learning is exposure, as well as formal study. Moreover language learners of English need to be made aware of colloquial speech structure and perhaps can be more aware of its existence and thus more inclined to make note of the speech and acquire it.

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