MITESOL

Slang in the ESL Classroom

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Abstract

When teaching English as a second or foreign language, slang often comes up in the classroom. Students often use slang they have heard (appropriately or inappropriately), or the teacher him or herself uses slang and is met with confused expressions from students, requiring an explanation. This paper seeks to show that a systematic teaching of slang in ESL classrooms is helpful to students and elucidates some methods that can be used to teach slang in the ESL classroom.

When teaching English as a second or foreign language, slang often comes up in the classroom. Students use slang they have heard (appropriately or inappropriately), or the teacher him or herself uses slang and is met with confused expressions from students, requiring an explanation. Slang English is used frequently, not just in movies and conversation, but in academic and work life as well. As ESL teachers, the authors of this paper endeavored to seek out the importance of teaching slang to ELLs and to discover the methods that are used to teach slang to ELLs. The authors also sought out methods that could be developed to teach slang to ELLs.

What Is Slang?

In 1978, Dumas and Lighter provided a definition of slang that encompassed 4 categories:

1. Slang reduces formality (lowers the register of the discourse in which it is used); for example, the sentence "Shakespeare was one of England's most awesome writers" gets laughter from students, because of the juxtaposition of registers.
2. It demonstrates group familiarity (usually with a lower-class/status group); for example, when President Obama recently came to Detroit to speak to blue-collar workers, he introduced Secretary of Labor, Hilda Solis, by saying she was "in the house" (Obama, 2011). This is an example of using slang to create in-group status.
3. Slang is a taboo term (with people of higher status); for example, curse words would fall into this category.
4. It replaces a word that would cause discomfort to the speaker if he or she used the word instead (euphemism). For example, this would include slang words for male and female specific body parts.

If a word or phrase satisfies at least 2 of these requirements, it is slang. Dumas and Lighter (1978) put it this way, "When something fits at least 2 of the criteria, a linguistically sensitive audience will react to it in a certain way" (p. 16). They go on to

explain that the reaction can not be measured, but that reaction can tell you if a word or phrase is slang or not. The authors of this paper have utilized these four criteria to determine what is or is not slang for the purposes of this paper.

Jargon is sometimes considered to be a form of slang. For example, if one is in the hallway at MITESOL and overhears the comment "You know, I really think that second language acquisition can only be enhanced by methods that teach students to internalize both lower and higher register target vocabulary," either you would wonder what the person was saying, or you would say, "Aha! They are TESOL people." We can clearly see that this example meets the requirements for "Group Familiarity"—we display our "in-group status" by using the jargon of the profession. However, jargon does not reduce formality (it actually increases formality), it is not considered taboo, nor is it used as a euphemism. For the intents and purposes of this paper, we do not consider *jargon* to be slang.

Two other categories of language are often argued to be slang: colloquialisms and idioms. Colloquial language is defined as "informal words or phrases" (dictionary.com). They can also carry dialectical uses. While slang is generally more transient, colloquialisms tend to have more staying power. Idioms, on the other hand, are loosely defined as phrases that do not make sense when taken literally ("Idiom", dictionary.com, n.d.). However, we can see that idioms reduce formality—if a professor says that she would "bet the farm" that what she predicts will come true, this is more casual than if she said, for example, she guarantees that it will happen. More clearly, idioms can be euphemisms, as in "He kicked the bucket" or "that elephant in the room." In this paper, we consider colloquialisms and idioms to be slang.

Why Is It Important for English Language Learners to Know Slang?

One reason why ELLs should know slang is that ELLs who work in a predominately English-speaking country will encounter slang in the workplace. As an example, we looked at a study that was done on ESL engineering students doing an internship in the workplace (Myles, 2009). The students said that it was difficult to communicate in the workplace because they did not understand the slang that their coworkers were using (Myles, 2009). The researchers in that study suggest that English for Special Purposes courses could include a "cultural" language component (Myles, 2009).

In addition to the workplace, ELLs will encounter slang in academic work. Huang (2004) talks about the slang encountered in academia, looking at problems of lecture comprehension due to the "effects of colloquial and slang expressions." Half of the students in the study responded that when their professors use slang expressions, it makes it difficult for them to understand the lecture (Huang, 2004). Only 24% of the students in the study disagreed with that statement (Huang, 2004). Students studying in artistic fields felt more strongly that their teachers used slang that they couldn't understand, while students in scientific fields were better off, but still had trouble understanding their professors due to the slang they used in the classroom (Huang, 2004).

In 2003, Simpson & Dushyanthi performed a study on idioms in academic speech using the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE), which is a collection of speech recorded at the University of Michigan between 1997 and 2001. By looking at the corpus data, the researchers found that there were "a significant number of

idioms" and that knowledge of the meanings of the idioms used were necessary to understand the lectures (Simpson & Dushyanthi, 2003). This research demonstrates that although ESL students may not encounter slang and idioms in written academic texts, they will certainly encounter it in the classroom, and therefore need some kind of systematic support to learn authentic slang.

In addition to the benefit of slang to ESL students in their academic lives, Preece (2009) demonstrated that slang helps ELLs build community and establish social networks outside of the classroom, which is especially important for students living in the United States or other English speaking countries. Preece (2009) explained how students had to negotiate based on potential groups of friends, one group that spoke "posh" English and one that spoke slang.

Solano Flores (2006) studied the fact that students are often only trained to use an "academic" register. Although students may establish a nonacademic register quickly, they still need to be able to distinguish between the two registers (Solano Flores, 2009). Learning slang also helps students to develop more native-like speech. Myles (2009) and Huang (2004) both illustrated that even college professors use slang or idioms (i.e. stay on the ball, or don't let the homework get over your head); therefore it is imperative that ESL students learn not only what has been established as "academic" discourse, but that slang has an important role in the lives of students and, therefore, in the ESL classroom.

Methods for Teaching Slang

The authors looked at methods that could be or have been used in various ways to teach slang to university-level ELLs. Some of these methods are defined and described in the following section.

Students can learn slang in a guided way in the classroom, or merely be encouraged to learn slang on their own; however, teachers should provide resources and encouragement to learn slang independently. Explicit instruction in the classroom, much like vocabulary teaching, can help students learn more slang. Encouraging students to keep a "slang journal," or to include slang as part of a vocabulary journal, could have a place in a speaking and listening or even a reading class.

Obviously slang can be found in movies, music, and interactions with native speakers. Students should be encouraged to find the slang in these resources on their own, by noticing slang as it occurs in movies, music, and their surroundings; the ESL instructor could also use authentic materials in the classroom to introduce specific slang terms, but also to model how different registers can be navigated and exploited, depending on the situation.

The main goal of ESL teachers who want to encourage students to learn slang should be to provide resources and teach students how to use them. The resources exist; however, students may not be aware of them or of how to use them (further research could be conducted to determine students' level of knowledge of slang and where they get information about slang). Some free online resources that could be helpful to students include (but are by no means limited to) bbc.co.uk, urbandictionary.com, and YouTube.com.

Slang dictionaries in print form also exist, but they tend to be outdated quickly. A list of recently published slang dictionaries can be found in Appendix A. Students can be

encouraged to check their university or public library for these and other slang dictionary resources.

One of the authors of this paper gave a sample lesson on slang to an advanced speaking and listening class at a university in 2012 (the lesson plan can be found in Appendix B). The instructor talked to students about the meaning of slang and demonstrated slang resources for students to use. A few days after that lesson, one student brought a question to the teacher about a slang word that she had heard and looked up on urbandictionary.com, one of the resources that the teacher had demonstrated in class. Although anecdotal, this is an example of how providing students with resources to learn slang can be an effective way of producing independent language learners and of enhancing students' overall English instruction and excitement about learning English.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the researchers found that slang is important for English language learners to know, due to the prevalence of slang in the workplace, academia, and slang's nature in helping ELLs develop social networks; however, teaching slang in ESL classrooms is not a standard practice. ELLs should, at the very least, be taught strategies for learning the meaning of slang and idioms in order to promote their overall English literacy. ESL instructor support and encouragement for learning slang could help students to develop their English proficiency and feel more connected to the English-speaking community in which they live.

In order to leave the reader with a sense of the importance concerning the teaching of slang in the ESL classroom, the writers of this paper have developed an example paragraph that uses three slang *translations*. The first paragraph is written using slang of the 1920's (http://local.aaca.org/bntc/slang/slang.htm), the second with *current* slang, and the third in *academic* language.

Paragraph 1: 1920's Slang

A **drugstore cowboy** got on his **iron** and pulled up to a **joint**. Unfortunately, he got **spifflicated** and was given the **bum's rush**. When he tried to **get a wiggle on**, he ended up being stopped by a **bull**. The next morning, he called a friend of his who was a **swell**. His friend gave him some **rubes**, and everything was **jake**.

Paragraph 2: Current Slang

A **player** got on his **bike** and pulled up to a **bar**. Unfortunately, he got **crunk** and was **thrown out**. When he tried to **peace out**, he ended up getting stopped by the **po-po**. The next morning, he called a friend of his who was a **baller**. His friend gave him some **cheddar**, and everything was **cool**.

Paragraph 3: Academic Language

A **man who requests to have intimate relations with many women** got on his **motorcycle** and drove to **an establishment where alcohol is served**. Unfortunately, he became **inebriated** and was **escorted out of the establishment**. When he tried to **return to his home**, he ended up getting stopped by an **officer of the law**. The next morning, he called a friend of his who **had a lot of money**. His friend gave him some **money**, and everything was **copacetic**.

Presumably, the reader had some difficulty understanding the meaning of at least some of the paragraphs using unfamiliar slang. The final paragraph additionally illustrates the need for slang, as speaking in academic language is considered unnatural in certain situations and, at times, can be unwieldy. This illustration clearly demonstrates why ELLs are lost without slang.

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Slang of the 1920's. Retrieved March 27, 2011 from
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Appendix A: Suggested Slang Dictionaries

Ayto, J., & Simpson, J. (1992). *The Oxford Dictionary of modern slang.* Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press

Drucker, J. (2003). *What's up? A guide to American collegespeak: Slang & idioms for TOEFL students.* Lawrenceville, NJ: Thomson/Peterson's.

Kipfer, B. A., & Chapman, R. L. (2007). *Dictionary of American slang.* New York: Collins.

Lighter, J. E. (1994). *Random House historical dictionary of American slang.* New York: Random House.

Partridge, E., & Beale, P. (2002). *A dictionary of slang and unconventional English: colloquialisms, catch phrases, fossilized jokes and puns, general nicknames, vulgarism and such Americanisms as have been naturalized.* New York: Routledge.

Spears, R. A. (2000). *NTC's dictionary of American slang and colloquial expressions* (3rd ed.). Lincolnwood (Chicago), IL: McGraw-Hill.

Appendix B: Proposed "Slang Strategies" Mini-Lesson Plan

The authors recommend that this mini-lesson be included in a larger context.

Target Class for this Mini-Lesson: High-intermediate to advanced students in a Speaking/Listening or American Culture course at the Secondary and/or Tertiary level.

Objective: Introduce Students to Slang & Demonstrate Slang-learning Resources

Materials needed: Laptop with internet access and a projector.

Elicit: What is slang? (Write S responses on the board; if they don't know, explain: Slang is casual/informal English.)

Elicit: Can you find the slang in these sentences? (Write on the board or put on the projector.)

For each sentence ask: Is it slang? Why or why not?
- "Let's go get some noms after this."
- "The train ride was awesome."
- "Okie-dokie."
- "This is what I have to deal with all the time."

Elicit: What other slang words or phrases do you know/have you heard? What do they mean? How can you find the meaning of a slang word or phrase if you don't know? (Students may respond: ask someone, look it up in a dictionary, etc.)

Open urbandictionary.com. Type "chicken out" into the search box. You will see the screen below:

Elicit: What information does this dictionary give you about the phrase "chicken out"? (meaning, example sentence, other words that mean the same thing)

Point out the "thumbs up" and "thumbs down" icon on the right. Elicit: What does this mean?

*NOTE: Like Wikipedia, anyone can edit urbandictionary.com. The "thumbs up" and "thumbs down" icons allow the community of users to vote on whether the definition is accurate or not.

Point out that a high ratio of "thumbs up" to "thumbs down" means that the definition is probably reliable. In addition, explain that because urbandictionary.com can be edited by anyone, it can include offensive statements, bad words, and other things you *may not want* to use; however, that can be helpful for ESL students as well, because their teachers may not want to explain what some things mean!

Like any vocabulary, slang has meaning, use, and grammar that goes with it. Elicit: What part of speech is "chicken out"? (verb) Explain that paper slang dictionaries exist and often give the part of speech; however, they are not as up-to-date as an online slang dictionary.

Practice: If your students are fairly tech-savvy and bring their smartphones or laptops to class, have students open urbandictionary.com, or download the smartphone app (as of the writing of this paper, available for free on iPhone and Android). Alternatively, assign this activity as homework.

Write this list of "safe for class" slang words to look up using urbandictionary.com (double-check before using these words that they are still "safe," as urbandictionary.com does tend to update rapidly).
- facepalm
- noob
- epic fail
- boo
- creeper

Students can write the words with their definition and example/s in an existing vocabulary journal, if the class is using one, or in a new collection of just slang words.

For homework, students can find words they have heard in their lives that they want to know what they mean; or assign the students to watch a video and listen for the slang, then look it up using urbandictionary.com or write sample sentences using the words you looked at in class today.