

## *Students' Slang and the Awareness of its Use: A Case Study*

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### **Abstract**

Language is tightly bound to context. The latter leads to the emergence of different varieties. To instantiate with, slang is an informal variety used by students to interact among themselves. The present study on "The Awareness of Students' Slang. A Case Study" aims to examine the awareness of slang use through taking the case of students learning the English language. This research singles out students of English at Khemis Miliana University as my curiosity, as their teacher, pushes me to investigate their awareness of their variety use. So, it tries to give a keen view on the students' consciousness of slang features daily used in their conversations. Throughout this research, both the qualitative and quantitative approaches were opted for .. To inquire on this issue, data were gathered through interviewing students of English from different levels to get insight on slang features' awareness. The results show that students of English are not aware about their slang employment.

**Key Words:** Awareness, slang, students, university.

### **Résumé**

La langue est étroitement liée au contexte. Ce dernier amène l'apparition de différentes variétés. A instancier, l'argot est une variété utilisée par les étudiants pour interagir entre eux. La présente étude sur « La prise de conscience de l'utilisation de l'argot des étudiants. Une étude de cas » vise à examiner la prise de conscience de l'utilisation de l'argot en prenant comme cas des étudiants en langue et littérature anglaises. Cette recherche cible ceux de l'Université de Khemis Miliana, car ma curiosité, en tant que professeur, me pousse à enquêter sur leur prise de conscience de leur utilisation de cette variété linguistique. Il essaie donc de donner une idée précise de la conscience des étudiants concernant des traits d'argot utilisés quotidiennement dans leurs conversations. Pour les besoins de cette recherche, les approches qualitatives et quantitatives sont choisies et afin de s'enquérir de cette question, des données sont recueillies en interrogeant ces étudiants venus de niveaux différents pour avoir un aperçu sur leur connaissance des caractéristiques de l'argot. Les résultats montrent que les étudiants d'anglais ne sont pas conscients de leur emploi de l'argot.

**Mots-clés :** Prise de Conscience, L'argot, Université, étudiants.

### **المخلص**

ترتبط اللغة بإحكام بالسياق الذي يؤدي إلى ظهور أنواع مختلفة للغة منها ؛ العامية وهي : مجموعة متنوعة يستخدمها الطلاب للتفاعل فيما بينهم. والبحث هو معاينة حالة تهدف إلى دراسة وعي الطلاب باستخدام العامية ؛ عامية " اللغة الإنجليزية " ، بانتقاء. ينتقي هذا البحث طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية في جامعة خميس ميليانة. كما دفعني الفضول ، كمعلمهم للتحقيق في إدراكهم لاستخدام العامية ، حيث يحاول البحث إعطاء وجهة نظر حريصة على وعي الطلاب حول ميزات العامية المستخدمة في محادثاتهم اليومية. وعلى مدار البحث تم اختيار كل من المناهج النوعية والكمية لمعالجة هذه الإشكالية ، وتم جمع البيانات من خلال إجراء مقابلات مع طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية من مختلف المستويات للحصول على إحصاءات حول وعيهم لخصائص العامية المستعملة. فأظهرت النتائج أن طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية لا يعون استعمالهم للغة العامية..

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الوعي ، العامية ، الطلاب ، الجامعة

## Introduction

Slang is a variety which results from context. It is used in informal situations. According to some researchers as Eble (1996) and Sorning (1981) to mention but few, slang can be used by students to fulfill various discursive needs. Relative to the present study, slang is employed by students of English at Khemis Miliana University to satisfy their communication requirements. This research paper looks at whether students of English at Khemis Miliana are aware of their slang use. Before answering the core question of this study, it is required to define slang variety.

### 1. Literature Review

As any term, slang is controversially provided various definitions according to some sociolinguists. Sorning (1981) has considered slang as an informal variety compared to the codes employed in formal situations. Relatively, she has claimed that slang is “*a stigmatized language variety or deviant variant when compared with the codified standard language*” (1980, 71). Leech and Svartvik (1981) have argued that slang is peculiar to a given a particular category of people, but it is not understood by out- group members like they say:

*Slang is a language which is very familiar in style, and usually restricted to members of a particular social group, from example “teenage slang”, “army slang”, “theatre slang”. Slang is not usually fully understood by people outside particular social group, and so has a value of showing intimacy and solidarity of members.* Leech and Svartvik (1981: 26)

More deeply, Leech and Svartvik (1981) has seen slang as a means of inclusion since it breaks social distance among in- group members. Nevertheless, it is a tool of exclusion due to the difficulty of its perception by out- group members. In addition to colloquialism, Eble (1996:11) has approached slang from ephemerality perspective in his definition. He has claimed that slang vocabulary is in a constant change. It is utilized to satisfy certain

needs like establishing social bonds and fostering identity.

All the aforementioned discursive functions are accomplished through certain features like Fowler (1926:308) has mentioned:

*is a diction that results from the favorite game among the young and lively of playing with words and renaming things and actions; some invent words or mutilate, or misapply the old, for the pleasure of novelty, and others catch up such words for the pleasure of being in fashion.* Cited in Barry (2010: xIviii)

According the previous quote, Fowler (1926) has argued that slang results from playing with words to be creative and modern. It is constructed through creating new words, following word-formation processes (Yule, 2006), slang words are the output of either *transformation* or *transposition* as well. The former occurs at the level of morphology as shortening, compounding, and derivation. The latter is a semantic process which entails changing the meaning of some existing words. To investigate the core issue of this research, awareness of slang features' use, certain methodological tools are to be opted for.

### 2. Methodology

#### 2.1. Participants

The informants of this study were students of English at Khemis Miliana University. They were selected as the fact of being their teacher helped to increase familiarity with them for undertaking this present research. The sample comprises fifty students who were given the questionnaire. Only forty-five of them participated in the present study. They were chosen specially to investigate their consciousness of slang use. They belong to the three levels of license (first, second, and third year) but with unequal number. More importantly, gender equation is not taken into consideration in the present research.

## 2.2. Procedures

Data collection took place with unstructured schedule. It was the outcome of questionnaires designed for students of English at Khemis Miliana University. The questionnaire consisted of questions for investigating the awareness of students about their slang employment. To supply a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the issue, the questions were a blend of open and closed ended questions. This choice of the closed response questions can be expounded by Brown (2001) who argues that "closed response questions are also easier to answer and less likely to be skipped by respondents" (p.37). He also claims that they are easy to be analysed and interpreted. In similar vein, students preferred to be given possibilities to facilitate the task for them. Whereas, the open response questions were established to give flexibility for the respondent to express themselves as well as to gain a wide insight about the issue studied (Clow and James, 2014). The questionnaire consisted of sixteen questions.

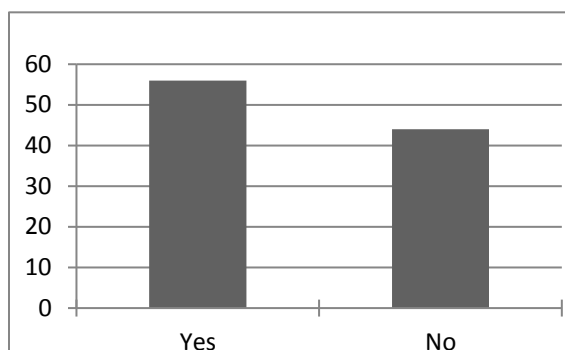
The questionnaire contained three parts. The first part consisted of demographic questions related to gender and level. The second one consisted of both open and closed response questions which revolve around the relationship between students and their teachers, the concept of speech community, and the variety used in their interactions. The third part revolved around the context of students themselves. The latter contained open questions for which students are required to supply some terms according to the slang aspects provided. These are the constituents of the questionnaire.

## 3-Findings and Discussions

The first two questions revolve around student's gender and level. Taking into account those parameters, it is displayed that their number is inequitable. From their responses, the sample consists of twenty-five females and twenty males. The informants consist of fifteen first year, twenty second year, and ten third year students. These students fill in the questionnaire.

The third question is related to the concept of speech community. In the present study, it is viewed from the perspective that people belong to various communities at the same time. The students here are asked whether they form an English language speaking community with their teachers since they learn English. The following graph manifests their various choices.

**Graph 1:** The Construction of Speech Community between the Students and their Teachers



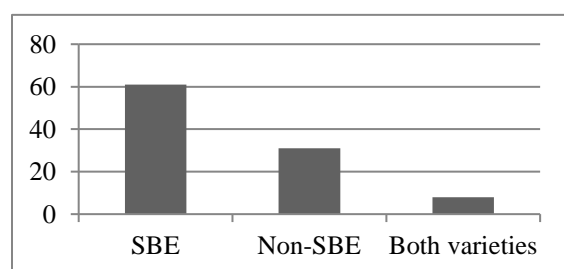
From the first graph, it is pre-eminent that the students' answers in the first question have no relation to this question. 56% claim that they form an English speaking community. Some of them explain it in terms of having the same language as it is illustrated in some answers as 'while discussing different topics we use language as a tool', and 'we use the same language in order to communicate within the class and even outside'. The remaining students expound from the idea of having the same interest as being exemplified in one of the female learning Gender Studies: 'we use the same language and we have the same interest because we are doing gender classes'. However, 44% of them are for the inexistence of speech community. They perceive the construction of speech community from the perspective of having long time participation because they justify their choice and tell 'we only have time to study, how does it come that we build a speech community.' These are the standpoints from which they explain the existence and the absence of speech community.

From the students' answers, many ideas come into existence. It is apparent that the informants who are for the subsistence of speech community are

aware of its construction through explaining it in terms of sharing the same language and interest. But, for those who neglect its existence are not aware that speech community is not constructed out of close relationship and longtime participation.

The fourth question addresses the kind of the variety students use with their teachers. From the analysis of the questionnaire, data collection shows that the majority of students say they use Standard British English because for them it is the language of formal context and more academic as some of them claim that *'it is considered the best or the most acceptable one academically'*, *'it is the language used in formal contexts'*, and *'it is learned at university'*. The students' explanation of the variety shows that they are aware of their choice since they explain it in terms of context and formality. The remaining students choose to use the non-standard British English. It is expounded in terms of the lack of mastery and facility to be used as they mentioned *'I don't have the capacity to speak standard British English'*, and *'it is easy to get closer to our teachers'*. The result is represented in the following graph.

**Graph2:** The varieties students use to interact with their teachers



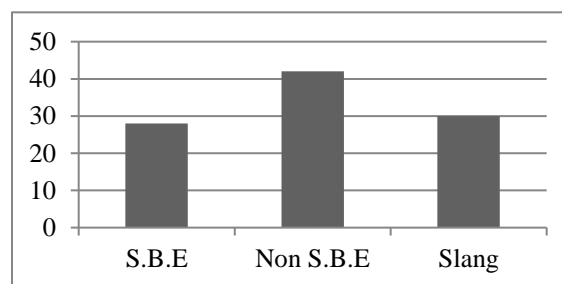
Data collected from questions five and six which address whether students use with their mates a variety different from that with their teachers and what is its kind shows that the majority of students are conscious about the distinction of the two contexts and the use of slang among their mates.

72% show that the variety used with their mates is different from that used with their teachers. They explain their choice in terms of context, formality and distance as well as the features used like they say: *'I think that the case is not the same, when we are with the teacher the situation becomes*

*more formal than with my mates'*, *'I use casual language with my friends which is full of mistakes that I use for different purposes'*, *'Because most of the time, we use informal English that contains many slang words abbreviated words'*, and *'because with our mates ,we are close to each other but with my teachers there is more respect'*. Throughout their justification, it is apparent that students are aware of the context.

28% claim that there is similarity between the variety used with their teachers and mates. They expound their preference from different angles. Some of them argue: *'I see no difference between the language I speak with my teachers and friends'*, *'because I learn Standard British English'*, and *'I like to speak a good English'*. From the mentioned answers, it is obvious that students are not aware that the change of participants is part of context that leads to language shift as well. Thus all of those participants in question (5) opt for Standard British English as it is summarized in graph three:

**Graph 3:** The Varieties Students Use with their Mates



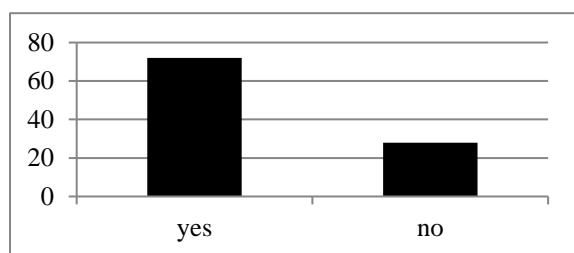
As the graph manifests, 30% of students answer that they employ slang with their mates. Some of them explain their standpoint by saying that: *'all my mates use slang'*, *'As classmates, we use slang because it is easier than Standard English. There is no respect of the grammatical rules, and the freedom of speech'*, and *'I use slang because I like hip hop singers'*. All previous mentioned arguments exhibit that students are apprehensive about their use of slang since some students stated some of its features as the ungrammatical structures.

Moreover, 42% of the students' mention that they utilize non-Standard British English. They dissect that they utilize it because of the distance *'we*

use informal variety and we use it with our mates because we are close to each other' and the situation 'speaking to our teachers is not the same as we speak to our mates' and because of its special features according to them 'we speak just words that come to our minds with some borrowing or clipping'. More importantly, it is explicit that students are not conscious of their use of slang as they spell the features of slang.

Question seven addresses whether students construct their own distinctive community. It is related to the previous question since students who opted for Standard British English claim that they do not form their community which is different from that of teachers. However, the majority of them who select non-Standard British English and slang tell that they construct their own group as some of them say: 'we construct an English speaking community, we use words, phrases and expressions that I cannot understand', and 'because the English we use is less formal and the subjects we tackle are intimate'. From their explanation, it is lucid that that majority are aware that they really constitute their own community. The outcomes of the question are represented in the following graph.

**Graph4:** Students' Awareness of their own Community Construction.

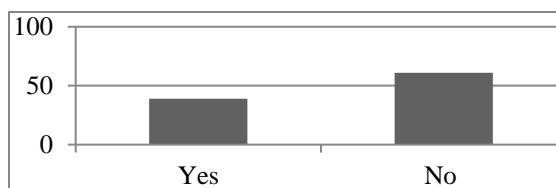


Questions eight and nine investigate whether students create words and to provide words and expressions they coin. The majority of them, as the chart manifests below, mention that they do not create words in their daily conversations. Nevertheless, the residual confirm that they coin words. Some of them state that they spell the English language with an Arabic accent like in *Smsini* for 'send me an SMS', *nwikendi* 'I spend the weekend', *bringili* 'to bring'. They also create expression out of an Arabic meaning as *Give a wind*

to your legs which is used to usher someone. They invent nouns and verbs for words as for *arentica*, they form the noun *arentication*. The results are manifested in graph five.

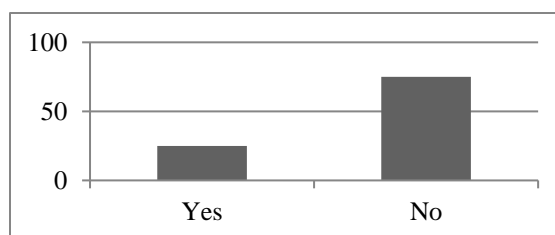
**Graph5:** Students Awareness of their Words Creation.

Questions ten and eleven contain one of meaning and pronunciation shift features of slang.



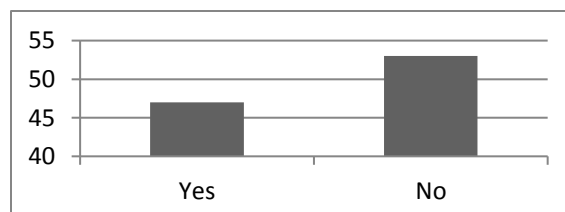
Data gathered from the students' responses show that most students neglect the use of the mentioned features. However, a scarce number of students demonstrate their employment of those features through some examples such as; *I aint going* for I am not going, *gonna* 'going to', *kinda* for 'kind of'. More importantly, the following chart represents the findings.

**Graph6:** Students' Awareness of their Use of Pronunciation and Meaning Shifted Words



Questions twelve and thirteen address the shortened forms aspect of slang. The aim of those questions is seeking shortened expressions that students may use. The coming chart exhibits the results.

**Graph7:** Students' Awareness of their Shortened Forms Use

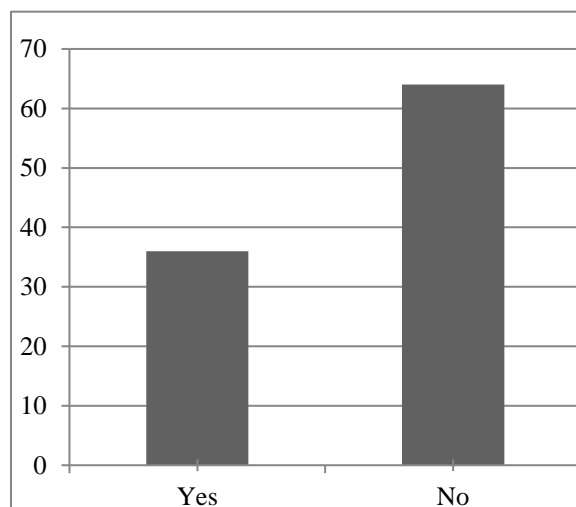


As it shown above, 53% of students claim about the absence of shortened forms in their

language. Though, 47% of them confirm their existence through mentioning some clipped terms as *cause* 'because', *sis* 'sister, and *pic* for picture, *morpho* 'morphology'. They also state some acronyms which are part of their daily concerns as students of English as PC for personal computer, ICC 'Intercultural Communicative Competence'. Thus, not all students are aware of the short forms feature of slang. There are other features to be considered as well.

Questions fourteen and fifteen are concerned with borrowing as one of slang characteristics. They aim at seeking some borrowed words students use in their interactions. The data gathered from question fourteen are represented as the following:

**Graph8:** Students' Awareness of Words Borrowing Use



As graph eight shows, it is obvious as in the previous questions findings that the majority of

students' state that they do not borrow from other languages. With contradistinction, there are some students who announced that they use loan words from different languages to accomplish certain discursive needs. They borrow words from Arabic as *Chokran*, and *gracias* from Spanish for thank you, as well as from French such as *Im fatigué* for 'Im tired'. Some students are not aware of the fact of borrowing.

### 5. Conclusion

Throughout this research paper, we have been trying to answer the following question: Are all students aware of their own slang use?

This research brought the following results forward. The analysis of the students' questionnaire ranges from the concept of speech community to slang use. Most students are not aware of the community construction either with their teachers or among their groups. Some of them are aware that they use slang. When being introduced to the slang features, there are various outcomes. When asked about the creative, the shortened forms, and borrowing aspects, the number exceeds who opt for slang. This means that some students are not aware of slang use. However, when asked about pronunciation and meaning shift, the number of students who confirm is less than those who are for slang. It may be concluded that students are not aware of their slang use.

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**Appendix:**  
**Students' Questionnaire**

Dear students,

I would like to ask you kindly to read and fill in this questionnaire. You are requested to ponder about your daily experience as students of English in Khemis Miliana University. Please, respond carefully to these questions to provide possible answers that would be used in a research paper. Your responses are going to be anonymous.

1-Sex: male  , female

2- What is your  level?.....

2-As first year master students, what kind of relation do you have with your teachers?

1-Close

2- Distant

Justify your  position

3-Do you form an English language speaking community with your teachers?

1-Yes

2-No

Justify your  choice

4-What is the English variety you are using with your teachers?

1-Standard British English

2-Non Standard British English

Justify your choice

5-Is the English variety used with your teachers the same used with your mates?

1-Yes

2- No

Justify your choice

6-As first year master students, what is the kind of the English variety you employ with your mates?

1-Non-standard British English

2-Standard British English,

3-Slang

Justify your choice

7-Do you think that you are constructing an English language speaking community distinctive from that with you teachers?

1-Yes

2-No

Justify your  position, please.



9- Do you coin words that you use with your mates as students of English?

1-Yes

2- No

10-If yes, would you provide some examples that you use?  
.....

11-Do you exploit words and shift their meaning or their pronunciations when interacting with your mates?

1-Yes

2-No

12-If yes, would you provide some examples you use?  
.....

13-Do you use shortened forms as acronyms and clippings with your mates?

1-Yes

2-No

14-If yes, provide some examples you use, please?  
.....

15-Do you tend to borrow words from other languages than the English languages to be used among your students' mates?

1-Yes

2-No

16-If yes, would you provide some examples, please?  
.....

Thank you in advance