

The Use of English Slang In Learning English By Generation Z Student In Tiktok Social Media: Sociolinguistic Approach

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to describe the use of English slang in learning English by Generation Z students through TikTok social media, and to analyze how such exposure influences their language skills, particularly in vocabulary acquisition and the contextual use of slang. The study also seeks to explore how students interpret and adapt slang as part of their language learning experiences in the digital era. The research applied a qualitative descriptive method with a sociolinguistic approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and direct observations involving 15 students from various study programs who actively use TikTok in their daily lives. The data were then processed through stages of reduction, display, and conclusion drawing, allowing the findings to capture the phenomenon comprehensively and in detail. The results reveal four main themes. First, Exposure to English shows that students encounter slang intensively through captions, comments, and interactions with content creators. Second, Impact on Learning indicates that slang enriches vocabulary and lexical knowledge, yet its use in formal contexts remains limited and may cause miscommunication. Third, Situation and Use of Slang highlights that slang is commonly used in casual peer conversations, functioning as an expression of social identity and group solidarity. Fourth, Understanding of Slang demonstrates that students acquire slang through curiosity, independent searches, and peer assistance. In conclusion, the use of English slang on TikTok serves as an authentic language input that enriches vocabulary and enhances informal communication among Generation Z students. However, contextual awareness is necessary to ensure its appropriate use, particularly in academic and formal settings.

INTRODUCTION

English has long been recognized as a global language that plays a significant role in various fields such as education, technology, business, and international communication. In Indonesia, English has been formally introduced into the education curriculum from elementary school to university level. Its position as a world language, spoken by more than 1.5 billion people either as a first, second, or foreign language, makes the mastery of English an essential skill for the younger generation to access global opportunities and knowledge. Therefore, the education system is expected to provide students with the competence needed to use English effectively in both academic and professional contexts.

Traditionally, English language learning in Indonesia has been dominated by a focus on formal aspects such as grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Students are trained to communicate within academic and professional frameworks where accuracy and standard forms are highly valued. While this approach helps learners gain structural knowledge of the language, it often neglects the informal, dynamic, and authentic forms of English that are widely used in real-life interactions, especially in the digital era.

The rise of technology and social media has transformed the way people, particularly younger generations, learn and use English. Digital platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok have become important sources of exposure to authentic English. Among them, TikTok stands out as one of the most popular platforms used by Generation Z. Its short, engaging videos expose users to diverse linguistic expressions, including idioms, colloquialisms, and slang, which often do not appear in formal classroom materials but are vital for natural communication.

Slang, as one of the most prominent features of informal English, has gained significant attention in recent years. It is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but also a cultural and social marker that reflects group identity and solidarity. For learners of English, exposure to slang through digital platforms provides an opportunity to understand how language evolves in authentic social contexts. However, the use of slang is still rarely discussed in formal English learning settings, particularly in Indonesian universities, even though it plays a significant role in shaping communicative competence.

Generation Z, often referred to as “digital natives,” is the cohort most affected by the influence of social media on language use. Their daily engagement with platforms like TikTok leads to frequent encounters with English slang, which they adopt, adapt, and reinterpret in their own communication practices. This phenomenon raises questions about how such exposure contributes to their language development, particularly in vocabulary acquisition and cultural awareness. At the same time, it challenges educators to reconsider the boundaries between formal and informal learning in language education.

The increasing use of English slang among Generation Z students also creates a tension between formal education, which emphasizes standard English, and informal digital practices, which rely heavily on slang. While slang enriches vocabulary and helps students communicate more naturally with peers, it may also create confusion or miscommunication in academic or professional contexts. Thus, understanding how

students use, interpret, and learn slang is important for developing teaching strategies that bridge the gap between formal instruction and authentic language use.

Given this context, TikTok represents both a challenge and an opportunity in English language education. On the one hand, it introduces learners to new slang expressions in dynamic, entertaining, and socially relevant contexts. On the other hand, it requires learners to develop awareness of when and where such expressions are appropriate. From a sociolinguistic perspective, studying slang in TikTok allows researchers to explore how language variation reflects social identity, peer group dynamics, and the cultural values of Generation Z.

Based on these considerations, this research investigates the use of English slang in TikTok by Generation Z students, particularly its role in informal language learning. The study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how slang exposure influences vocabulary development, communicative practices, and social identity construction. Furthermore, it seeks to highlight the implications of integrating authentic, technology-driven input into English education in Indonesia, where the formal curriculum often overlooks informal but highly relevant aspects of language use.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of language and society, particularly within the scope of sociolinguistics, highlights the close relationship between communication and social identity. Sociolinguistics emphasizes that language is not only a neutral means of communication but also a reflection of cultural values, group identity, and social status (Wardhaugh, 2006; Holmes, 2013). In this regard, slang occupies a unique position as a form of non-standard language that often serves as an identity marker for certain groups, especially youth communities. Its dynamic and ever-changing nature makes slang an important aspect of language variation that deserves academic attention.

Slang itself has been widely discussed in linguistic studies as a creative, informal, and context-dependent form of language. According to Partridge (2002), slang functions to distinguish group identities, build social closeness, and serve as a tool for creative expression. For younger generations, slang not only enriches their vocabulary but also strengthens bonds with peers, particularly within digital communities. This aligns with Holmes-Elliott's (2017) observation that slang is deeply tied to cultural dynamics and youth identity construction.

In the context of language learning, exposure to slang is rarely emphasized in formal education, which traditionally focuses on grammar, syntax, and standard vocabulary (Cameron, 1995). However, studies have shown that authentic input—language use in real, everyday contexts—enhances learners' communicative competence more effectively than purely formal instruction (Gilmore, 2007). This suggests that exposure to slang through authentic platforms such as social media can play an important role in second-language acquisition, especially in vocabulary development and pragmatic awareness.

The emergence of social media platforms, particularly TikTok, has significantly transformed how Generation Z engages with language. TikTok, with its short, engaging, and highly interactive content, provides abundant opportunities for learners to encounter informal English in authentic contexts (Sharabati et al., 2022). Firamadhina

and Krisnani (2021) found that TikTok not only serves as a space for entertainment but also supports informal education and digital activism, illustrating its potential as a medium for incidental learning. This finding supports the argument that TikTok offers authentic exposure to English slang that cannot be replicated in traditional classrooms.

Research also indicates that social media influences not only language use but also lifestyles and social interactions. Khansa and Putri (2022) revealed that TikTok shapes teenagers' fashion choices, consumer behavior, and communication styles. In terms of language, this influence is reflected in the widespread adoption of slang terms such as fomo, slay, no cap, or abbreviations like LOL and TBH. These expressions often circulate virally and become embedded in the everyday communication of Generation Z, strengthening their role as markers of group identity.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, the use of slang on TikTok can be analyzed as part of language variation that reflects age, social status, and cultural background. Holmes (2013) argues that language variation emerges naturally from social interactions, while Labov (1972) emphasizes that speech choices are shaped by situational contexts. In this way, Generation Z's use of English slang on TikTok is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but also a reflection of social identity construction and cultural adaptation within digital communities.

Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012, is often labeled as digital natives due to their deep immersion in technology and social media from an early age (Dolot, 2018). Their preference for instant access to information, visual content, and interactive communication makes platforms like TikTok highly appealing. As a result, slang use among Gen Z is not only a linguistic practice but also a cultural trend that shapes their worldview and communication patterns. This reinforces the idea that studying slang provides valuable insights into both linguistic development and generational identity. Existing literature highlights that English slang, particularly as encountered through TikTok, represents an authentic and influential aspect of language learning for Generation Z. It enriches vocabulary, enhances informal communication, and strengthens social identity, though its use remains limited in formal academic contexts. By applying a sociolinguistic approach, this study positions slang as both a linguistic and cultural resource, bridging the gap between formal English education and the authentic, dynamic communication practices of digital youth communities.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design aimed at exploring the use of English slang by Generation Z in the context of TikTok as a medium of informal learning. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study, focusing not only on the linguistic forms of slang but also on its social meanings and functions in everyday communication. As Miles and Huberman (1994) argue, qualitative research enables researchers to capture rich and detailed data that reflect the complexity of social and linguistic practices.

The descriptive nature of this research was intended to systematically present facts and patterns related to slang usage, without manipulating the situation under study. This design was considered suitable because the research sought to describe how Generation Z students use, interpret, and learn English slang on TikTok, as well as to identify the implications of such practices for English language learning. By adopting this

approach, the study emphasizes understanding over measurement and interpretation over prediction.

The primary data sources were 15 students from Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidenreng Rappang who belong to Generation Z and actively use TikTok in their daily lives. Informants were selected through random sampling to ensure a fair representation of students from different study programs. The decision to include multiple academic backgrounds was based on the assumption that slang usage is not limited to English majors but is a widespread phenomenon across diverse student communities.

In order to collect data, two main techniques were used: observation and in-depth interviews. Initial observations were conducted to identify how students engage with TikTok content containing slang expressions. These observations provided an overview of the frequency and type of slang encountered, as well as the contexts in which they were used. Following this, semi-structured interviews were carried out to gather more detailed insights into students' perceptions, experiences, and strategies in understanding and applying slang.

The semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility while maintaining a clear focus on the research objectives. A set of guiding questions was prepared, covering aspects such as the duration of TikTok use, examples of slang encountered, strategies for understanding slang, and perceptions of slang use in formal versus informal contexts. At the same time, informants were encouraged to elaborate freely on their experiences, enabling the researcher to capture spontaneous and authentic responses.

To ensure the validity of the data, triangulation techniques were applied. Data from observations were cross-checked with interview findings to identify consistency and strengthen the credibility of the results. This methodological triangulation minimized the risk of bias and provided a more holistic picture of the phenomenon. Additionally, peer debriefing and member checking were employed to verify the accuracy of the interpretations drawn from the data.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which consists of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. In the reduction stage, irrelevant or repetitive information was filtered out to retain only the most significant data. The display stage involved organizing data into tables, themes, and descriptive narratives to make patterns more visible. Finally, conclusions were drawn by identifying recurring themes related to slang exposure, usage, and its impact on English learning.

Through this methodological framework, the study aims to produce a comprehensive description of how English slang is encountered, understood, and used by Generation Z students on TikTok. The approach not only highlights the linguistic aspects of slang but also sheds light on its sociocultural significance, thus aligning with the sociolinguistic perspective adopted in this research.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are based on in-depth interviews and observations involving 15 Generation Z students from Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidenreng

Rappang who actively use TikTok. The data reveal significant patterns in how English slang is encountered, understood, and applied in students' daily communication. The results are presented thematically to address the research questions.

First, the intensity of TikTok usage among participants is relatively high, ranging from 2 to 10 hours per day. Students who spend longer hours on the platform encounter slang more frequently, while even those with shorter usage still report consistent exposure. This indicates that TikTok serves as a continuous and influential source of informal English input.

Second, the variety of slang terms encountered is broad and dynamic. Students reported exposure to expressions such as *no cap*, *slay*, *fomo*, *sus*, and *flexing*, alongside abbreviations like *LOL*, *TBH*, *RN*, and *POV*. These slang items appear in captions, comments, and video scripts, reflecting both auditory and visual input. Some terms are repeated so frequently that they become embedded in everyday communication.

Third, students adopt different strategies to understand slang. Some actively search for meanings via Google or Urban Dictionary, while others rely on contextual clues from captions or explanations in the comment sections. Peer-to-peer discussions also serve as an important learning strategy, reflecting a collaborative and curiosity-driven approach to language learning.

Fourth, the impact of slang on English learning is primarily reflected in vocabulary enrichment. Most students agreed that exposure to slang increased their word bank and improved their ability to understand informal expressions commonly used by native speakers. However, the influence on grammar, speaking accuracy, or formal writing remains limited, showing that slang primarily supports informal language competence.

Fifth, the majority of students expressed reluctance to use slang in formal contexts such as classroom presentations. They considered slang inappropriate in academic or professional settings due to its casual and context-bound nature. Nevertheless, some students argued that slang might be acceptable in specific situations if the audience understands its meaning.

Sixth, the contexts in which slang is actually used are largely informal. Students reported employing slang when chatting with friends, commenting on social media posts, or discussing movies and music. The use of slang often arises spontaneously and is sometimes mixed with Indonesian, highlighting its role in casual, hybrid communication practices.

Seventh, the findings also show that slang functions as a marker of social identity and group belonging. Students felt that using slang makes conversations more enjoyable, strengthens bonds with peers, and signals their alignment with global digital trends. In this sense, slang serves not only as a linguistic resource but also as a cultural and social tool.

Finally, the overall results demonstrate that TikTok provides authentic and continuous exposure to English slang, enriching students' informal vocabulary and supporting peer interaction. However, students remain cautious about transferring

slang into academic contexts, indicating an awareness of the boundaries between formal and informal language use.

Tabel Ringkasan Hasil Temuan

Aspek	Temuan Utama
Durasi penggunaan TikTok	2–10 jam per hari, semakin lama penggunaan → semakin banyak paparan slang
Jenis slang yang ditemukan	<i>No cap, slay, fomo, sus, flexing</i> ; singkatan: <i>LOL, TBH, POV, RN, ASAP</i>
Strategi memahami slang	Aktif: mencari di Google/Urban Dictionary; Pasif: konteks video/komentar
Dampak pada pembelajaran	Menambah kosakata informal, meningkatkan pemahaman ekspresi sehari-hari
Sikap terhadap konteks formal	Mayoritas menolak slang di presentasi kelas; minoritas fleksibel
Situasi penggunaan slang	Chat dengan teman, komentar media sosial, diskusi film/musik
Fungsi sosial slang	Identitas kelompok, keakraban sosial, mengikuti tren global
Peran TikTok	Media paparan bahasa autentik, mendukung pembelajaran bahasa informal

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that TikTok serves as a significant medium of exposure to English slang for Generation Z. The high frequency and intensity of TikTok use among students provide continuous opportunities for incidental vocabulary learning. This supports Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985), which emphasizes that frequent exposure to comprehensible input accelerates natural language acquisition.

The diversity of slang encountered by students reflects the dynamic nature of language variation in digital spaces. Expressions such as *slay*, *fomo*, or *no cap* not only carry linguistic meaning but also function as cultural markers. This finding aligns with Holmes (2013), who argues that lexical choices in interaction are closely tied to identity construction and social belonging.

The strategies employed by students to understand slang demonstrate the dual role of intentional and incidental learning. Active strategies, such as searching for meanings online, reflect intentional vocabulary learning (Oxford, 1990), while passive strategies, such as contextual guessing, align with Nation's (2001) notion of incidental vocabulary acquisition. This shows that digital environments naturally combine both modes of learning.

In terms of impact, slang primarily enriches vocabulary rather than structural aspects of language learning. Students reported increased familiarity with informal expressions, yet they acknowledged that slang has little influence on grammar or formal speaking skills. This supports Eble's (1996) argument that slang's primary function is social, not academic, serving more as a tool for identity and solidarity than for standardized competence.

The reluctance of students to use slang in formal contexts demonstrates pragmatic awareness. They recognized that slang is context-dependent and

inappropriate in academic or professional discourse. This finding resonates with Labov's (1972) view that speech variation is strongly tied to situational appropriateness, where speakers adapt linguistic choices to fit the setting and audience.

The frequent use of slang in casual interactions highlights its role in shaping social identity. Students used slang to strengthen bonds with peers, express humor, and signal group membership, consistent with Wenger's (1998) concept of communities of practice. In this sense, TikTok acts as a site where language, culture, and identity intersect, creating new forms of digital socialization.

The findings also suggest that slang functions as authentic input that enhances engagement in language learning. By encountering slang in real-life contexts, students feel more motivated to learn and use English, supporting Godwin-Jones' (2018) view that authentic and contextualized materials increase learner interest. This demonstrates that informal digital platforms complement, rather than compete with, formal classroom instruction. The discussion highlights both the opportunities and limitations of learning English through slang on TikTok. While slang exposure enriches informal vocabulary and strengthens social bonds, its use in academic contexts remains limited. Therefore, integrating insights from sociolinguistics into English education can help educators acknowledge the value of informal learning while guiding students toward appropriate language use across different contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the use of English slang by Generation Z students on TikTok and its role in the process of learning English through a sociolinguistic perspective. The findings revealed that TikTok provides continuous and authentic exposure to slang expressions, ranging from abbreviations to colloquial terms, which students frequently encounter in videos, captions, and comments. This exposure contributes to incidental vocabulary learning and enriches students' informal communication skills, particularly in casual peer interactions.

Furthermore, the results showed that students employ both active and passive strategies to understand slang, such as searching for meanings online or inferring from context. Slang is predominantly used in informal settings, such as chatting with friends or engaging in social media interactions, while its use in academic or professional contexts remains limited due to concerns about appropriateness and potential miscommunication. This indicates that students possess pragmatic awareness of when and where slang should be used.

the use of English slang on TikTok plays a dual role for Generation Z students: it enhances their informal vocabulary and fosters social identity within digital communities, while at the same time highlighting the boundaries between formal and informal language use. For educators, these findings suggest the importance of acknowledging the value of authentic input from social media while guiding students toward developing contextual awareness and communicative competence across diverse settings.

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