

WHY NOT TEACH SLANG IN THE CLASSROOM?

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Abstract

Whether we should teach slang in a foreign / second language class has always been a controversial issue among the ELT practitioners since most of the language teachers consider it as a lower level of language on the basis of its vulgarity in an academic environment. However, there are also some other teachers who believe that slang is an integral part of everyday language. As known by everybody, slang differs a lot from the standard and formal language from the point of its vocabulary and structure. It is an inevitable fact that slang has penetrated even into mass media and it is a living, constantly expanding, and regularly evolving language phenomenon. It is for this reason that a student who learns a foreign language in Turkey often encounters some difficulties in understanding some TV serials as well as communicating with the people of a young generation.

In this paper I suggest that slang needs to be integrated into foreign language classes and that this is the only way to enable young learners to have confidence in themselves and interact with native speakers.

Key words: *Slang, culture, standard English, role-play, imitation, lyrics*

YABANCI DİL DERSLERİNDE NİÇİN ARGO ÖĞRETİYORUZ?

Özet

“Yabancı dil derslerinde argo dilin öğretimi gerekli midir? “ sorusunun yanıtı her zaman bir tartışma konusu olmuştur. Devam etmekte olan bu tartışmalar, genellikle dil öğretmenlerinin argo dili seviye açısından son derece uygunsuz olarak kabul etmelerinden kaynaklanmaktadır. Ancak, argo dilin günlük İngilizcenin bir parçası olduğunu düşünen kişiler de vardır. Bilindiği üzere, argo gerek sözcük dağarcığı gerekse dilbilgisi kuralları açısından standart dilden farklıdır. Argo, artık günümüzde öylesine yaygınlaşmıştır ki sözlü ve yazılı basında bile kendini hissettirmekte olup, her geçen gün gelişimini sürdüren canlı bir iletişim aracıdır. İşte bu nedenden dolayı, Türk okullarında yabancı dil öğrenen bir kişi yurt dışına çıktığında özellikle gençlerle iletişim kurmakta zorlanmaktadır.

Bu makalede, okullarda mevcut olan müfredat programlarına argo dilin entegre edilmesini, böylelikle öğrencilerin kendilerine daha çok güveneceklerini ve yabancı dilde yayınlanan TV dizilerini daha iyi kavrayıp, genç yaşlılarıyla kolaylıkla iletişim kurabileceklerini savunmaktayım.

Anahtar kelimeler: argo, kültür, standart İngilizce, rol yapma, benzetim, şarkı sözleri

INTRODUCTION

Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (1992) defines slang as “casual, very informal speech, using expressive but informal words and expressions” and *Merriam-Webster’s* online dictionary characterizes slang as “nonstandard vocabulary of extreme informality, usually not limited to any region which includes newly coined words, shortened forms, and standard words used playfully out of their usual context”. Because of this diversity and lack of consensus on the definition and its common use in public, I support teaching slang in the classroom. For a better understanding of the subject and arriving at a consensus, I find it useful to talk a little bit about what slang is, where it comes from, who uses it and why, and how it is received.

- a. Slang is often defined as informal language which is associated with particular groups of people and through which people express their identity. The idea of identity leads us into the question of why people use slang. Slang is often used by people who wish not to be understood by people outside the group. People use it to give their group a distinct identity. Thus, while they tease each other and share common experiences, they keep everybody else at a distance. In other terms, they want others to know who they are and what they stand for.
- b. Learners claim to be a part of a particular group by using the slang associated with a particular social group. If you use the group’s slang language, you will be included in the group. If not, exclusion occurs. My experience in language teaching for years has, therefore, proved that non-native speakers are so eager to learn slang for inclusion and acceptance in a foreign country where the target language is spoken. In a word, slang is cohesive.
- c. Slang also has some personal benefits. Using slang makes you desirable. Thus, you demonstrate that you are in tunes with the times and that you know what is culturally in fashion. In addition, you prove how well you master the situation. This is because slang is used only in certain settings. What is important in this context is that you need to know how and when to use it. In brief, slang is a kind of status.
- d. It is only through slang that you share emotional and social experiences. So it reinforces your relationships. Also, it is fun. It is creative like poetry. Some semanticists describe slang as the “poetry of everyday life.” It is a form of play, or entertainment.
- e. The differences between slang and standard English is sometimes so striking that a beginner learner would hardly understand the meaning of a slang expression. Below are given some slang terms developed by internet users over the years. Most of these are not actually cronyms as they cannot be pronounced, but

that is what they are called nonetheless. Many of these terms originated for saving keystrokes and are often written in lower case:

AFAIC - “as far as I’m concerned”, or “as far as I care”, or “as far as I can...”

AFAIK — “as far as I know”

AFAIR — “as far as I recall”, or “as far as I remember”

AFK — “away from keyboard”

ASAP — “as soon as possible”

BBL — “be back later”

BBS — “be back soon”

BFD — “big fucking deal”

BRB — “be right back” (usually used in chats and on an instant messenger service).

BTW — “by the way”

B2B — “Business to Business”

C&V — Chapter & Verse. Used in newsgroups.

C|N>K — a Unix -ism meaning “coffee through nose into keyboard”

CYA — “see you”, used as a goodbye.

CU — “see you”, used as a goodbye.

CYS — “Check your settings”. A phrase often said by technical support staff of a certain Australian ISP.

FAQ — “Frequently Asked Question”

FFS — “for fuck’s sake!”

In the light of the preliminary information given above, it is obvious that the ever-evolving differences in the vocabulary and structure of slang occur due to urbanization, mass communication, big city life, and the development in the oral and written communication used in daily life and the like.

COUNTER-ARGUMENTS ABOUT TEACHING SLANG

Language teachers are generally against teaching slang on the grounds that slang is inappropriate in an academic environment and that it is a lower level of language. They have the fixed idea that the teaching of slang distorts the standard English and this would lead to disadvantage for students. It is my personal conviction that the

teachers who have counter-arguments are non-native speakers and they possess no knowledge of slang at all. For such teachers it is easier to use textbooks audio / video supplements that use standard English. The students who are taught the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) through these course materials are active in class activities and can use the four skills with excellence. However, the same students can fail in communicating with native speakers, watching TV programs and movies, reading pop culture magazines, and especially when travelling to the country where the target language is spoken.

Now that slang is beneficial to access the world of the target language, the issue is, then, which of the two categories of slang we should teach. Proper slang or obscene slang? By *proper slang*, I refer to the slang that is used in everyday life and can be heard everywhere. This kind of slang is the integral part of our speech. Nevertheless, curse words can also be taught to only adult students in advanced classes so that they may not be embarrassed when communicating with native speakers.

Slang is an important element of culture as well. Emmitt and Pollock (1997:47) describe culture as ideas, customs, skills, and tools which characterize a given group of people in a given period of time.

When students learn any language, they must also be taught the culture of the target language since culture influence our way of thinking and acting. We are unable to communicate efficiently and effectively without a complete grasp of the culture. As teachers, we need to appreciate that individuals who possess another language as their first language possess a different culture and a different way of creating meaning and reality (Emmitt and Pollock, 1997:48). If we don't enough knowledge of the target language from the point of socioculture, facts and contexts, comprehension fails to a great extent because we use language as a tool to express its culture. (Anderson and Lynch, 1988 cited in Yagang, 191 in *Selected Articles from the English Teaching Forum, 1989-1993*).

Now that slang is a reality and a living phenomenon, our goal should then be to guide our students acquire a communicative competence. Thus, they come to know the right register for a given context and recognize words from a particular register. This knowledge of an informal register helps them understand the discourse and take part in a different culture like a member of the culture being taught.

HOW TO TEACH SLANG

Since the teaching of slang in the classroom is a controversial and disputable subject, there are hardly few resources on how to teach it. Due to the fact that many of

the language teachers are nonnative speakers, they lack the knowledge of slang and they do not have enough materials to be integrated into the syllabus. Another reason for the lack of information on this topic is that slang is rather unstable. Slang words and expressions change rapidly through the course of time. New slang words and expressions appear every day and the older ones die out. This is what makes it impractical to publish a book. That is why most language teachers are in a dilemma about what to teach: **a)** only up-to-date slang, **b)** only outdated slang, or **c)** both of them? My personal conviction is that both of them should be taught simultaneously. Thus, our learners will be able to differentiate older and up-to-date words and catch up with the current informal usage of language. Furthermore, they do not sound funny to native speakers.

Slang might be taught to students via **a)** song lyrics, **b)** movies, and **c)** role plays and simulations.

a. Song Lyrics:

Music is a powerful stimulus because it can directly speak to our emotions and allows our brains to analyze it. It can change the atmosphere in the classroom and prepares students for a new activity while it amuses and entertains them. It establishes a connection between the world of leisure and the world of learning... The books that contain song lyrics are the most useful kinds of texts for students to work with, especially the songs in them are the ones that the students are keen on. Therefore, teachers choose songs that they like and the ones which are appropriate for young learners in terms of topic and subject matter. (Harmer, 2001:242-243).

As for how to use song lyrics in class, Harmer (2001:244) recommends some activities. For instance, **a)** the teachers blank out various words in a song and give the students a list of the omitted words. All the students need to do is to fill in the missing words using the given words while they are listening to the song, **b)** the students can put the scrambled lines in a song in order or complete half-finished lines, **c)** the teachers can simply have their students listen to a song and ask what they think the title might be.

If the students possess an upper-intermediate level of English or over, the teacher may ask them to replace slang words in a song with their standard equivalents or translate it into their mother tongue. Another activity is that students may be asked to memorize the slang in a song lyric as in the example song titled *Diamonds and Rust* by Joan Baez.

Original Song Lyrics	Translation of Slang
<p>Well <i>I'll be damned</i> Here comes your ghost again But that's not unusual It's just that the moon is full And you happened to call</p> <p>And here I sit Hand on the telephone Hearing a voice I'd known A couple of <i>light years ago</i> <i>Heading straight for a fall</i></p> <p>As I remember your eyes Were bluer than <i>robins' eggs</i> My poetry was <i>lousy</i> you said Where are you calling from? A <i>booth</i> in the <i>Midwest</i></p> <p>Ten years ago I bought you some cufflinks You brought me something We both know what memories can bring They bring diamonds and rust</p> <p>Well you <i>burst on the scene</i> Already a legend The unwashed phenomenon The original <i>vagabond</i> You strayed into my arms</p> <p>And there you stayed Temporarily lost at sea The Madonna was yours for free Yes the girl on the half-shell Would keep you unharmed</p>	<p><i>I'll be damned</i> I'm surprised</p> <p><i>light years ago</i> a really long time ago <i>Heading straight for a fall</i> going directly to failure</p> <p><i>robin's eggs</i> (not slang) large black birds. <i>lousy</i> poor quality</p> <p>booth (not slang) public telephone <i>Midwest</i> (not slang) the middle of the US, from to Ohio to Iowa and including states to the north. The song is about Baez's ex-boyfriend Bob Dylan, who is from Minnesota, a part of the Midwest.</p> <p><i>burst on the scene</i> appeared suddenly on the music scene</p> <p><i>vagabond</i> (not slang) wanderer</p> <p><i>the girl on the half-shell</i> (not slang) reference to the Renaissance painting "The Birth of Venus" by Sandro Botticelli</p>

Now I see you standing With brown leaves falling around And snow in your hair Now you're smiling out the window Of that <i>crummy</i> hotel Over Washington Square Our breath comes out white clouds Mingles and hangs in the air Speaking strictly for me We both could have died then and there Now you're telling me You're not nostalgic Then give me another word for it You who are so good with words And at keeping things vague Because I need some of that vagueness now It's all come back too clearly Yes I loved you dearly And if you're offering me diamonds and rust I've already paid	<i>crummy</i> low quality
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b. Movies:

If students are given a chance to see language in use as well as hear it, their level of interest will be on the increase. One of the most important advantages of videos and movies is that the learners do not only see the language, but also hear it. Students often find it easy to comprehend the movies since the gestures, expressions, mimics, the intonation that matches the facial expressions and other visual clues help to convey the meaning. As Harmer (2001:282) states, all such paralinguistic features provide meaning clues and help viewers to see beyond what they are listening to and interpret the text more deeply.

It is preferable that teachers show a movie which is not deep in meaning so that they may concentrate on the speech rather than the plot itself. As a pre-watching activity, the students are given a list of the slang vocabulary used in the movies. If teachers

do so, they can guess the meaning of the new slang words and expressions. It is also useful to give the students the meaning of the slang words and expressions in advance, discuss them in class, compare with their standard equivalents, and eventually try to understand the natural speech of characters while watching the movie as in the example movie titled *American Beauty*.

The original quote with slang	What does it mean?
<p>Carolyn: Uh, whose car is that out front? Lester: Mine. 1970 Pontiac Firebird. The car I've always wanted and now I have it. I rule!</p>	<p>Carolyn: <i>Whose car is that out front?</i> Lester: <i>It's mine. A 1970 Pontiac Firebird. The car I've always wanted and now I have it. I am the king of my world!</i></p>
<p>Lester: When I was your age, I flipped burgers just to be able to buy an eight-track. Ricky: That sucks. Lester: No, actually it was great. All I did was party and get laid. I had my whole life ahead of me.</p>	<p>Lester: <i>When I was your age, I cooked hamburgers just to be able to buy an eight-track tape player.</i> Ricky: <i>That's terrible.</i> Lester: <i>No, actually it was great. All I did was drink and take drugs and have sex. I had my whole life ahead of me.</i></p>
<p>Angela: I'm serious. He just pulled down his pants and yanked it out. You know, like, "Say hello to Mr. Happy." Playground Girl-1: Gross. Angela: It wasn't gross. It was kinda cool. Playground Girl-1: So did you do it with him? Angela: Of course I did. He's like a really well known photographer. He shoots for "Elle" on like a regular basis. It would have been so majorly stupid of me to turn him down. Playground Girl-2: You are a total prostitute. Angela: Hey! That's how things really are. You just don't know 'cause you're this pampered little suburban chick. Playground Girl-2: So are you. You've only been in "Seventeen" once and you looked fat! So stop acting like you're goddamn Christy Turlington! Angela: Cunt!</p>	<p>Angela: <i>I'm serious. He just pulled down his pants and showed me his penis. You know, as if to say, "Say hello to my penis."</i> Playground Girl-1: <i>Disgusting.</i> Angela: <i>It wasn't disgusting. It was kind of great.</i> Playground Girl-1: <i>So did you have sex with him?</i> Angela: <i>Of course I did. He's a really well known photographer. He takes photos for "Elle" on a regular basis. It would have been so incredibly stupid of me to refuse him.</i> Playground Girl-2: <i>You are really a prostitute.</i> Angela: <i>Hey! That's how things really are. You just don't know because you're this pampered little suburban girl.</i> Playground Girl-2: <i>So are you. You've only been in "Seventeen" magazine once and you looked fat! So stop acting like you're as good as Christy Turlington!</i> Angela: <i>Low female!</i> <i>"cunt" also means a woman's vagina. It is extremely impolite.</i></p>

As a post-watching activity, students take down notes as the learners watch the movie with subtitles. They may be required to write a report on the movie and show the differences between the colloquial language and the standard language which they are learning in their textbooks.

c. Simulations and Role Plays

After our students get used to the speech of the native speakers, it is time for them in simulations and role plays. They feel themselves highly motivated when they notice that they can act as native speakers. They also get a lot of benefit from simulations and role-play. These activities encourage oral fluency and prepare them for specific situations. (Harmer, 2001:274). Simulations simulate real life situations, while in role playing the participant is representing and experiencing some character type known in everyday life (Scarcella and Oxford, 1992). Simulations always include an element of role play (Ladousse, 1987). As for role-plays, they involve participants to 'act' in a given role which is clearly defined on a role-card. Other students in the group also have designated roles, and play their part in the activity accordingly. Role-plays can be very simple dialogues, often used to practice a recently taught language item, or they can be much more complex, involving several students who act out a scenario. Sometimes the script is provided, and sometimes students create the script for themselves. Role-play is very much akin to acting in a play (Wong, K.). Simulation and role-play have three distinct advantages: **a)** they are fun and motivating, **b)** hesitant students feel themselves free in expressing their opinions and behaviour, and **c)** students use a much wider range of language than some more task-centred activities may do if the teachers can broaden the world of the classroom to include the world outside.

3. CONCLUSION

There are still many theoreticians who see slang as decadent, undesirable, and uneducated. Those people consider themselves as guardians of the language and view any kind of change for the worse. I personally and firmly believe that slang is no longer a taboo as it once was and this assumption is totally absurd. Slang is a sign of life, vibrancy, and beauty in language. It is a living thing and no one can stop it from changing.

Since the teaching of slang is not so common in our country, it is the responsibility of the language teacher to prepare his own teaching materials. For this purpose, song lyrics, movies, and role plays and simulations help him a lot.

Although teaching slang in a formal classroom setting may seem inappropriate, there is no doubt that it is an important exercise. The slang is everywhere in the

English language and is used in all contexts. Considering many students find learning slang entertaining, it is an effective way to get the classroom eager to learn English.

I would like to summarize my point with a quotation from linguist Tony Thorne (2010), who says, “Slang... often performs an important social function, which is to include into or exclude from the intimate circle”.

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