



STUDENTS' USE OF SLANG AND ITS IMPACT ON FORMAL COMMUNICATION IN ACADEMIC SETTINGS: A CASE STUDY OF FEDERAL POLYTECHNIC, ILARO

By

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Abstract:

This study investigates the presence of slang in students' speech at the Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro (FPI), Ogun State, Nigeria and its effect on students' ability to communicate formally. The study was conducted in a mixed-methods design that involved analyses of the 320 questionnaires completed by respondents from six departments, classroom observations, and a systematic analysis of students' written scripts. The study identified and classified common slang expressions currently used by the respondents of FPI and their impact on the formal academic writing and oral presentation of the students as they include some slang expressions from various digital platforms, the street slang of the Nigerian people and the slang acquired from their campus. Results show that 87.5% of sampled students reported using slang every day and 64.3% of them reported using slang unintentionally in their examination scripts and formal reports. The study also reveals a statistically significant negative correlation ($r = -0.61$; $p < 0.05$) between the scores of formal communication proficiency and the slang-usage scores. Pedagogical implications and the recommendations for interventions are discussed, including structured language awareness programmes and genre-based writing instruction.

Keywords: *slang, formal communication, academic language, Federal Polytechnic Ilaro, code-switching, language attrition.*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Language changes. It is constantly evolving and changing with each generation as a result of social change, technology, and cultural interaction. In the case of young people, slang is used as a form of identity and group identity and social belonging, especially in tertiary education institutions. The wide use of slang in academic settings is a legitimate source of concern from the standpoint of its intrusion into the register associated with higher education. Slang is a natural and creative part of language, but use of slang in the academic setting is legitimate concern because of its encroachment into the formal register that higher education requires. The Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro (FPI), Ogun State, South-West Nigeria enjoys rich sociolinguistic setting for such inquiry, established in 1979. The institution has a student body of about 15,000 students, which comes from a variety of ethnic, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, and is a small sample of Nigerian youth language in action. FPI students deal with at least three codes of language everyday: Standard Nigerian English (the official medium of instruction), Nigerian Pidgin English and an ever-changing variety of slangs used at school and online.

The concern of this study is not only prescriptive since slang is not being condemned as a linguistically deviant. Instead, it takes a sociolinguistic perspective to question if the frequent



use of slang by students of FPI hinders the development and application of formal communicative competence. Formal English skills of Nigerian Polytechnic students generally have been noted by the employers, accreditation agencies, and supervisors as deteriorating over the years (Adegbija, 2004; Jowitt, 2019; Bamgbose, 2021). This paper seeks to investigate the possibility of slang culture as a contributing variable in the context of campus.

The objectives of this study are:

- (i) to identify and categorise prevalent slangs currently in use among FPI students;
- (ii) to assess the frequency and contexts of slang use;
- (iii) to evaluate the extent to which slang usage affects students' formal writing and speaking in academic contexts; and
- (iv) to recommend evidence-based interventions for language educators.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualising Slang: Definitions and Theoretical Foundations

The definition of slang has been different in different linguistic studies. Partridge (1933, cited in Adams, 2009: p. 3) defined slang as the language of the streets', and stressed the informal, unofficial and subversive nature of it. On a more precise level, Eble's (1996, p. 11) definition of slang is that it is 'an ever-changing set of colloquial words and phrases that speakers use to establish or reinforce social identity and cohesion within a group'. In the context of the university, this definition is especially apt, as slang is a sort of "shibboleth" of the membership of a peer group.

Theoretically, there are a number of approaches to understanding the acquisition and use of slang. Labov's (1972) sociolinguistic description of vernacular language emphasizes that informal registers can have social prestige in a community of practice, and that they may, in fact, compete with or replace formal registers in everyday communication. The act of using slang in a strategic way to establish a sense of solidarity, toughness, or 'digital savviness' among peers, while at the same time being expected to establish a sense of formality and academic competence before lecturers and in exams is better understood as the students' 'impression management' (Goffman 1959).

This study draws on Hymes's (1972) idea of communicative competence which is defined as more than just grammar, but also as the socially appropriate way of using language. High communicative competence means that a student has to be familiar with the forms of slang usage: to use them whenever it is appropriate (when addressing peers in informal conversations) and to refrain from using them when it is inappropriate (in examination scripts, seminar presentations or official correspondence). Without this pragmatic awareness, formal communication is compromised.

Slang and Youth Identity in the Nigerian Context

The Nigerian sociolinguistic setting is very complex. There are more than 500 indigenous languages in Nigeria with English as the official language of education, government and commerce. This multilingual environment produces strong contact phenomena such as code switching, code mixing and the emergence of Nigerian Pidgin as a medium of communication between the different ethnic groups (Bamgbose, 1992; Adegbija, 2004). In the context of this, youth slang in Nigeria can come from various sources: Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Nigerian Pidgin, British English slang, African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), and growingly, Internet and social media vernacular.

The strength of the Nigerian campus slang is at least a quarter of a century old. Taiwo (2004) found a special type of in-group slang used to create social boundaries on the campus; the register is called 'University of Lagos English'. In the same way, Omoniyi (2006) found the



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deliberate use of slang by Nigerian youths as a form of resistance to the perceived formalism of the elite. More recently, Udoudom and Udoudom (2018) compiled Internet-age slangs for Nigerian undergraduates and highlighted the fast rate of the evolution of slangs due to the use of social media platforms like Twitter/X, Instagram, TikTok and WhatsApp.

The Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro campus is located in the Yoruba speaking belt, so Yoruba words are often appropriated and re-semantised into campus slang, and students who come from other linguistic backgrounds, such as Igbo and Hausa, import its own vernacular flavour, resulting in a truly creolised slang environment. The slang use is found to be very dense in South-West Nigerian campus communities, partly because of the influence of Afrobeats music culture, Nollywood and Lagos Street culture, which continually infuse new lexical items into the young people's speech (Akanke & Salami, 2010).

The Interface of Slang and Formal Academic Language

The conflict between informal register (vernacular) and formal register (academic) is well documented in applied linguistics. Cummins (1979; 1984) made a seminal differentiation between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Conversational, context-embedded language skills that are relatively easily developed as a result of social interaction form the basis of BICS the area where slang flourishes. In contrast, CALP is context-free and cognitively complex language proficiency needed to complete academic activities like essay writing, formal argument, and technical writing. There are several empirical studies in Nigeria that have confirmed Cummins' prediction that a learner who is dominant in BICS but underdeveloped in CALP will be deficient in formal academic communication (Nwachukwu-Agbada, 2002; Akinjobi, 2009).

Biber (1988) found from his corpus linguistic analysis that the formal written academic language is significantly different from the spoken informal language in terms of lexical density, the number of nominalisations, hedging expressions, and passives. The cognitive gap students must overcome when writing more formal academic text is greater if their own everyday writing is slangier and more informal. This register gap may appear in student writing through the use of inappropriate lexicon, informality in the use of the syntactic structure and lack of academic vocabulary.

Pennycook (1994) and Canagarajah (1999) bring a critical pedagogical perspective; both warn against uncritical glorification of formal academic English, in favor of students' voices in their own language. They promote contrastive rhetorical strategies which will enable students to familiarise themselves with both the differences and similarities between different registers and avoid demonising conversational language. This view is relevant to the current research because it looks at the problem not as a disease to cure but as a linguistic competence deficit to be addressed via pedagogy.

Digital Media and the Acceleration of Slang among Nigerian Students

The era of the smartphone and social media has brought a huge surge in the number of slangs that are being used across the Nigerian campus, with more than 103 million Nigerian internet users as at 2024, (Statista, 2024). Apps such as TikTok, WhatsApp, X (formerly known as Twitter), Instagram, and YouTube are actually slang incubators, spreading new slang terms like a virus throughout student populations in just a few hours. Crystal (2001) was one of the first linguists to theorize that digital communication results in a new mode of language: 'Netspeak', which is defined as 'abbreviation, phonetic spelling, neologism and rule-breaking in play'. Herring (2007) later went on to define Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) as an arena of rapid language change.

Chiluwa (2012) carried out the study on 'the language of the users of social media in Nigeria' and discovered that there was a significant amount of phonological respelling (e.g., 'nau' for



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'now'), semantic extension of the words used and lexical borrowing from Pidgin, which he called 'cyber-Naija'. There is no escaping the way these digital slangs creep into the real-world interaction between students, and most importantly, real-world writing—when students don't switch the desired formal register. As digital communication becomes more and more informal, students' awareness of the registers becomes less and less, and formal writing appears more and more unnatural, said Awonusi (2010).

Impact on Academic Writing and Oral Communication: Empirical Evidence

There are several empirical studies that have measured the direct effect of slang on academic achievement or formal communication results. Udoudom et al. (2016) conducted a survey of 250 undergraduates in the University of Calabar and discovered that 73% had used slang in formal writing at least occasionally or frequently and 51% were unaware that some expressions used were slang and not standard English. This is particularly disturbing because it means there is often no intent to transgress registers, just a linguistic misunderstanding that results in a slangish infestation in a formal setting.

Opara and Okolie (2019) reported that there was a significant negative correlation between students' frequencies of using slang in day-to-day communication and the scores they obtained on the formal writing assessments conducted in two universities in South-East Nigeria. Their regression analysis revealed that slang frequency accounted for 34% of the variance in formal writing scores, while holding them constant. Ogunsiji and Farinde (2010) noted that Nigerian polytechnic students have a habit of using informal and slang expressions in their presentations during the seminar, to the detriment of their ability to use the formal speech socialisation, which is attributed to their inadequate formal speech socialisation.

Internationally, Rampton (1995) theorised 'language crossing' (the use of language varieties of other social groups) as a typical youth sociolinguistic practice which makes formal register acquisition difficult. His writing is relatable to the FPI environment where students may switch back and forth between Nigerian Pidgin, slang influenced by Yoruba, and Standard English several times a day. While this crossing is a social necessity, it is also reported to cause 'register blurring' (Swann and Sinka 2007) which is a loss of sensitivity to the functional differences between formal and informal language.

Pedagogical Responses and Institutional Frameworks

Several pedagogical interventions have been identified in the literature in order to address the tension of slang-formal communication in educational contexts. There has been widespread consensus in favour of teaching genre-based pedagogy (Martin, 1993; Hyland, 2004), where conventions of particular academic genres, like reports, essays, and presentations, are explicitly taught. Genre pedagogy makes formal academic writing visible, making it clear that formal academic writing is not simply a sanitised form of everyday language, but a formal academic register that is itself learnable.

Both Crystal (2004) and Labov (2010) warn against a deficit perspective in which students' vernacular is seen as a block, and emphasize the need to develop formal register competence while maintaining students' linguistic identity through additive language instruction. Olatunji (2017) found that a bi-register literacy model, which explicitly trained the students to differentiate between 'street English' and 'academic English' had significant effect on the formal writing skills of the students of the Ogun State polytechnic after one semester in the Nigerian context.

According to the National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014) English is the medium of instruction in Tertiary Institutions but does not provide any basis for the differentiation of registers and thus, it is left to individual institutions to draw their own language support structure. Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro's English Language unit, which is part



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of the Department of General Studies, offers compulsory communication skills courses, but these courses have been blamed for not focusing enough on the slang to formal register transition dilemma that is common among students today (Adeyemo, 2020).

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The design of this study was a concurrent mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), which combined quantitative survey data with qualitative data collected from classroom observations and document analysis of student examination scripts and formal reports. A mixed methods design was selected because both quantitative and qualitative methods were needed to answer the research questions that required a statistical measure of slang prevalence and impact, while also requiring a nuanced understanding of how slang is used in formal settings.

Study Site and Population

The study was carried out in Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro, Ogun state, Nigeria. The population involved were all the students of the 2010/2011 class of the National Diploma (ND) and Higher National Diploma (HND) students of six departments selected purposively: Mass Communication, Business Administration, Electrical/Electronic Engineering, Computer Science, Accountancy and Science Laboratory Technology departments. The various departments were chosen to reflect a broad range of arts/social science and technical disciplines to diversity the backgrounds of the participants.

Sample and Sampling Technique

A stratified random sampling was performed on a total of 320 students, around 53 for each department. In addition, 15 lecturers who were considered key informants were purposively selected. The sample size was calculated according to Taro Yamane's (1967) formula: $N = N/1 + (N/5 - 1)(d^2)$ using an estimated number of students in the department of 2500 students across the six departments with a 95% Confidence Level and 5% margin of error.

Instruments

Three instruments were used, namely (a) a structured questionnaire with five-point Likert scale items that were completed on the frequency, contexts and effects of the use of slang on formal communication, (b) a Formal Communication Assessment Task whereby learners were asked to write a 200-word formal communication report and then orally brief about their task in a 2-minute presentation, and (c) a Document Analysis Framework applied to 80 randomly selected examination scripts from Communication Skills and Technical Report Writing courses taken at the end of the second semester of the ND2 programme. The Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient for the questionnaire was 0.81, which was a high figure, showing a high internal consistency.

Data Collection and Analysis

Questionnaires were filled in in classrooms in the presence of the researcher, to explain the items and to make sure that the questionnaires were fully completed. The FCAT was tested under controlled conditions. Permission was sought from the institutions and anonymity of students was ensured to get examination scripts. The quantitative data were analysed by SPSS version 27, descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and linear regression. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data, in line with the six-phase reflexive thematic analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Permission was given for ethical clearance by the FPI Research Ethics Committee and all participants gave their written informed consent.



4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Catalogue of Trending Slangs among FPI Students

The data showed that there was a rich and dynamic slang lexicon used in the FPI campus. Table 1 is a representative sample of the most common slangs, sorted by source domain, and includes the contextual definitions as provided by student informants.

Table 1: Trending Slangs among FPI Students (Selected)

Category 1 – Digital/Social Media-Derived Slang

'No cap' meaning I am not lying / I am being completely honest (from AAVE via TikTok). 'Slay' means to perform impressively or look exceptionally good. 'Lowkey' means in a subtle or understated way; secretly. 'TYKYK' means If You Know, You Know (implies insider knowledge). 'Hit different' means to feel or affect one in a distinct or intense manner. Vibe check; to check out someone's mood or energy. 'It's giving...' means it reminds me of / it exudes (followed by a noun or adjective). To be 'ratio'd' means to get more negative than positive replies to a post; to be publicly defeated in argument. 'NPC behaviour' means acting robotically, without independent thought (from video game terminology). 'Mid' means average; not as good as expected.

Category 2 – Nigerian Street/Pidgin-Derived Campus Slang

'Japa' means to flee or migrate to another country for better opportunities (Yoruba origin, widely adopted). Omo means a surprise or emphasis. 'Abi?' a tag question seeking affirmation. That's your own business / suit yourself means 'Na you sabi'. 'E don do' means it is finished; it is over. Carry go means continue; go regardless of advice. Be alert to deception means 'Shine your eyes'. Hustle means to work hard or do anything to earn money. As an intimate friend would 'Per G' (from 'gangster'). To talk; to express oneself verbosely: 'Yan.

Category 3 – Campus-Specific/Academic Slang (FPI context)

A student who has failed in more than one course is called a 'carry-over merchant'. Famz means to seek attention or ingratiate oneself, especially with lecturers. 'Expo' means examination malpractice/cheating aids. Blow means to become popular or successful. To assert oneself or one's position in relation to others. 'Collect your certificate' means to be soundly defeated in an argument or competition. Grind season means Exam preparation time. On a low means secretly, without attracting attention. 'Ojoro' means cheating (Yoruba origin). 'Packaging' means pretending to be more affluent or knowledgeable than one is.

4.2 Frequency and Contexts of Slang Use

The results of the questionnaire analysis showed that 87.5% (280) of the respondents said they used slang every day; of which 62.8% said that they used slang 'frequently' or 'very frequently' even in contexts that they knew to be formal, for example, in informal pre-class communication with lecturers. Specifically, 74.4% said that WhatsApp group chats (including academic department group chats) were the main locations where slang was used. During the qualitative phase, one student commented: 'Even the HOD himself is part of the department group chat and people still send texts like to their friends. No one thinks about it.' This is in line with Awonusi's (2010) discovery of the reducing register sensitivity of digital spaces.

A contextual analysis further showed that slang was used the most in peer-to-peer communication (98.1%), social media (94.7%) and WhatsApp messages (93.4%) as well as in classroom discussions, which are not directly supervised by lecturers (67.8%), in meetings of the student union (58.3%) and surprisingly, in written messages addressed to the departmental administrators (34.1%).



Slang Infiltration in Academic Writing

Using document analysis methods, the 80 exam papers were examined to find 347 examples of slang and non-standard informal expressions in the context of formal academic writing. They included blatant slang (e.g., Accountancy script: 'The company was slaying in profits last quarter'; Technical Report Writing script: 'The engineer had to japa when the project failed.'), as well as more subtle lapses such as the use of sentence structures stylishly influenced by Pidgin English, the use of unsuitable contractions and the use of colloquialisms that were formally represented.

The mean frequencies for students in each quintile of slang use were compared on the formal writing tasks of the FCAT, and students in the highest slang-frequency quintile (those who reported using slang very frequently across all contexts) scored a mean of 48.3% on the formal writing, while students in the lowest slang-frequency quintile (those who reported using slang very rarely across all contexts) scored a mean of 71.6%. The study's third objective was supported with a Pearson correlation analysis which found a significant negative correlation between reported slang frequency and FCAT formal writing score ($r = -0.61$, $p < 0.001$). The data obtained from linear regression analysis showed that the frequency of the use of slang had a correlation of 37.2% with the scores obtained in the formal writing task ($R^2 = 0.372$; $F(1,318) = 188.4$; $p < 0.001$) which corroborates the regression analysis data obtained by Opara and Okolie (2019) in South-East Nigeria.

Slang infiltration was the most common quality concern that the lecturers expressed for oral communication in student presentations. Lecturers reported that these phrases 'giving main character energy' or 'it is hitting different' were used by students in the formal seminar presentations. Example of communicative competence as described by Hymes (1972): the student might have a basic knowledge of the grammar of English, but might not have the understandings necessary to bring the right formal mode of English into play in context.

Student and Lecturer Perceptions

Interestingly, 68.4% of students who use slang also recognized that it sometimes or often 'affected their ability to write formally', indicating some awareness of the issue, even amongst the students who use slang heavily. The social utility of slang as found in Eble (1996) and Omoniyi (2006) was reflected, though, in the fact that 71.9% agreed that 'slang makes communication more expressive and efficient'. This conundrum between recognised academic harm and perceived social benefit is similar to what Udoudom and Udoudom (2018) found in the University of Calabar.

Of the 15 lecturer informants, 13 (86.7%) indicated that they saw slang 'frequently' or 'very frequently' in students' examinations texts, and all 15 agreed that the formal communication skills of current students were 'worse' or 'much worse' than those of students 5 years ago. Ten lecturers explicitly blamed a part of this decline on the impact of social media and slang culture. The perceptions support Jowitt (2019) findings on the general low level of formal English in tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

Discussion

The combination of quantitative and qualitative data in this study clearly reveals that slang use among FPI students is widespread, increasing with the influence of digital media, and is significantly related to the decrease in the performance of formal communication. The results are an extension and corroboration of the existing body of Nigerian applied linguistics research



FUTIFMS International Conference

(Adegbija, 2004; Akande & Salami, 2010; Opara & Okolie, 2019) and add new campus-specific data from Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro.

The correlation found ($r = -0.61$) is moderate to strong, suggesting that slang frequency is a strong but not exclusive predictor of formal communication difficulties. There are other factors that are likely to play a role, such as socioeconomic status, previous school quality, reading habits, and lecturer quality. However, the effect size is large enough to justify specific institutional action. Importantly, the results of this study indicate that slang infiltration in formal writing is often unintentional (with 64.3% reporting that they unintentionally used slang in their scripts), which is consistent with the findings of Udoudom et al. (2016) and suggests that the issue is not attitude but competence: students may not have the pragmatic self-monitoring skills to detect register violations before they are written.

The campus slang system at FPI is not a problem in itself, it is a sign of linguistic creativity, social cohesion and natural adaptation of language to the youth culture of the present day. The problem is at the point of slang dominance and formal register demand. This is the area genre-based pedagogy (Hyland, 2004) and additive bi-register literacy approaches (Olatunji, 2017) aim to tackle.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This academic work was done to investigate the use of slang by the students of the Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro and to evaluate its implications for formal academic communication. The results suggest that the use of slang is common and influential in the campus context and has measurable negative impact on students' formal writing and oral academic communication. The study documented a rich and varied slang lexicon that was sourced from digital media, Nigerian Pidgin, Yoruba, and campus-specific sources, which is indicative of the multilingual and hyper-connected nature of contemporary Nigerian student life.

The research suggests the following recommendations: The FPI Department of General Studies should redesign its Communication Skills curriculum to provide explicit instruction on register differentiation so that students can be able to consciously identify and shift between informal and formal registers. Second, genre-based writing instruction should be adopted in all departments, and lecturers in technical and professional fields should be trained to reinforce the formal writing norms in their subject areas. Third, a language awareness programme should be established on the campus level, with seminars, workshops and digital campaigns that promote formal register competence and celebrate linguistic creativity. Fourth, students should be exposed to corpus-based vocabulary learning tools that allow them to expand their academic vocabulary on their own. Fifth, lecturers should use formative assessment techniques in marking student written and oral work, which involve giving feedback on the register, not just content and grammar.

Future studies should examine the effect of a bi-register literacy module over a single academic semester on formal writing scores through the use of a pre-test/post-test experimental design. Longitudinal studies that compare cohorts over multiple years would also be useful to determine if the correlation between slang usage and formal communication competence is growing over time as the use of social media grows. Comparative studies conducted at other polytechnics in Nigeria would further enrich the evidence base and could inform national level curriculum reform.



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FUTIFMS International Conference

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