

Reflections and Processes of Japanese Undergraduate Research on English Slang

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This paper presents reflective accounts of the process of undertaking and supporting undergraduate research on English slang from different perspectives: student and teacher. The stories herein relate to a Multidisciplinary Studies (MS) track, Language and Communication course offered in 2022 at the Kwansai Gakuin University Language Center. After a brief introduction from the teacher, Thomas, the students, Manami and Hinata, share their experiences, research findings, and reflective insights. The paper concludes with an analysis from Thomas of the pedagogical affordances and limitations of this endeavor, critical reflections on the course outcomes, and addresses implications for other instructors considering engaging with slang as a pedagogical or student research focus.

TEACHER: THOMAS- INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

I taught a new, elective, 14-week *Language and Communication* course on the *Multidisciplinary Studies* (MS) track on English slang in spring 2022 for undergraduates. I chose slang as a focus for this content-based course because I felt it was an underserved, but potentially interesting area that could be relevant for learners. Students needed an IELTS 5 equivalent or above to register, and the course was conducted in English. There were weekly open-response knowledge check tests, homework readings used for in-class discussion, and lectures. The intended learning outcomes included students understanding basic sociolinguistic aspects of slang development and improving their analysis and research skills by evaluating and discussing relevant academic materials. Lastly, students would propose, design, carry out, and present original research projects investigating slang usage in their own context for summative assessment. At the end of the course, I felt that these aims were met, but that it would be interesting to hear some student perspectives on it. As such, this paper first presents accounts from two of the students, Manami and Hinata, explaining their experiences and research. I provided support and guidance

on several rounds of pre-publication revisions of these sections. Following that, I reflect on some of the pedagogical affordances and limitations of this endeavor.

STUDENT: MANAMI- RESEARCH REFLECTION

The interesting part of the class was the diversity of ways in which we could learn about slang. The teacher introduced not only the words themselves but their history and influences. Therefore, each person in the class could conduct research on different aspects of slang. Moreover, the reading assignments helped me to organize my ideas, encouraged me to understand the material thoroughly, and to be committed to the class because the assignment included making a summary of the material.

Introduction

My research project looked at how familiar Japanese university students were with English slang. In particular, I wanted to know how well students knew the slang terms that I selected. The reason for choosing this research theme was that I felt that, regardless of their level of English fluency, Japanese students around me seemed to use English slang such as *chill* or *diss* in daily conversations. Therefore, I wanted to find out how consistently slang was being used by these students. It was difficult to decide on the topic because we learned about English slang from diverse perspectives such as the history of slang and the effects of using it in the course. Narrowing down the field was tough, however, I decided to do this because I was interested in making a questionnaire and analyzing it on my own.

Methods

The research process was divided into several steps. To begin, I selected 10 slang terms from websites that introduce high frequency worldwide slang (i.e. Editorial Department, 2021; Rebuffet, 2017). The words selected were *PPL*, *LOL*, *cheers*, *chicken*, *hang out*, *chill*, *diss*, *sup*, *screw up* and *bro*. These terms came from four categories: digital slang (*PPL*, *LOL*), high frequency worldwide slang (*cheers*, *chicken*, *hang out*), English slang introduced on Japanese websites (*chill*, *diss*, *sup*), and American slang (*screw up*, *bro*). I chose these categories to investigate which slang was more commonly used – the ones I had found online or other ones I hear in person. Then, if slang used offline was more widely used, I wanted to research whether the words I often hear in Japan were really popular or not. In addition, I used the *Corpus of Global Web-Based English* (Davies, 2013) to confirm the locations of high frequency worldwide slang and American slang.

Next, I developed a questionnaire to give to university students. Respondents were first asked to rate their knowledge and usage of the 10 slang terms I had selected, from level 4, (*know it's meaning and have used it in daily*

conversation) to level 1, (*don't know its meaning and have never used it.*)

Additionally, another question asked respondents to write down other slang they knew. Following this, I administered the questionnaire to potential respondents. Last, I analyzed the results. The data collection required two days, from June 27th to 28th, which was unexpectedly shorter than I imagined. It was surprising that I was quickly able to get 90 responses. I predict this is due to my friends' curiosity toward such a relevant and interesting topic. Most respondents were people I knew from KGU's *English Speaking Society*, a club to which I belonged. Since the main purpose of the club was English conversation, the members showed strong interest in English vocabulary used in daily conversation.

Results

The most common terms were high frequency worldwide slang (*chicken*, *cheers*, *hang out*) as 92.2% of responses were level 4 (*know it's meaning and have used it in daily conversation*) and level 3 (*know the meaning but have never used it before*). On the contrary, the least common category was American slang (*screw up* and *bro*). Only 55.55% (50 responses) of respondents knew them. The result was shocking as I had predicted that digital slang would be the most widely used category. This is because I feel Japanese students nowadays are exposed to Anglo-American culture through the Internet more than ever. For example, some of the reading material from class had mentioned how the spread of digital devices had led to Norwegian students becoming knowledgeable about English slang (Hasund & Drange, 2014). Therefore, I had predicted that digital slang was likely to be the most commonly known.

Respondents also wrote down other slang they knew. The most common responses were abbreviations such as *asap* (5 responses) or *lmao* (3 responses) which are often considered digital slang. Although some respondents mentioned using greetings such as *sup* or mild swear words like *shoot*, actually it was these initialisms and acronyms that are often used online which made up the biggest part of the results. This proved my prediction that digital slang was most widely recognized and used, although the result of the first question was unexpected. Personally, I was relieved to get diverse results from the two questions, especially the second question because I was able to get results that supported my hypothesis, that is, that digital slang would be the most recognized.

Reflection

The most difficult part of this research was making appropriate questionnaires with correct choices of slang. Occasionally, I used corpora to analyze how these words are used worldwide. However, the limitation was that it was difficult to gather results from students who had different levels of interest in English. Although I was happy that I succeeded in collecting 90 responses, the

majority of those surveyed might be considered quite fluent in English compared to general Japanese students. This might have influenced the results. So, my advice to those who wish to do research regarding English slang usage among Japanese students is to compare several websites to choose which slang to include in the questionnaire. For instance, when listing American slang, choosing the most frequent terms among various sources that introduce American slang would be more helpful, not only those listing slang (i.e. Klein, 2023; Snider, 2022), but also slang dictionaries (i.e. Green, 2023). Also, although the course lessons had been useful in preparing me for the research, it would have been more beneficial if the course had covered slightly more about the connection between English slang and Japanese young people. Even though it was included in the course, some more background information about this topic could be interesting since it is relevant to us (as Japanese students).

However, on the whole, the entire process of doing the research has been inspiring. I was given an opportunity to connect what we had learned in class to reality among young Japanese students. This course and subsequent research enhanced my interest toward English more than ever as the content was practical, and the research was memorable. It was such a valuable experience to conduct the whole process and deepen my understanding even though this is not my graduation thesis nor my field. Lastly, I appreciate the teacher's kind guidance and constructive advice on each step of the research process.

STUDENT: HINATA- RESEARCH REFLECTION

Throughout the class, I learned not only about the meaning and usage of English slang, but also the process of carrying out research. Learning in order from input to output helped my understanding and increased my interest in language. I pay more attention to internet slang than before, and now I often look up the meaning and origin. In addition, I was able to carry out my research project about gaming slang in accordance with my interest because the class dealt with a different slang topic every week, including internet slang.

Introduction

My research looked at the differences between English and Japanese speakers' usage of the gaming slang initialism *GG*, meaning *good game*. There were four reasons why I chose to look at this topic. The first reason was that I simply just like to watch online gaming videos. Beyond that, the second was that I had become curious about differences in loan word usage between native speakers of English and Japanese. From the class, I had learned that function and meaning often change when English words are borrowed by another language. For example,

the Japanese word, エモい [emo-i], clearly comes from the English word, *emotional*, but has an added い [i] (adjective suffix). Basically, words retrieved from English are written in katakana, but are combined with hiragana to grammatically transform them into Japanese. The meaning has also changed to be closer to something like English *nostalgia*, likely through the normal process of semantic shifting that affects loan words. I felt that this could make *GG* an interesting slang term to study in an online game with players from different countries. A third reason was that I thought internet slang, especially gaming slang, needed to be researched because much of it has come into use by gamers fairly recently. The last reason was that we learned in class how closed environments often produce new slang. Language, like *GG*, used by gamers would probably have the characteristics of slang as it developed inside a particular gaming community. My project went smoothly at this stage as it did not take many hours to decide on *GG* because there is not much other English gaming slang used in Japan.

Methods

After narrowing down my topic, I started planning data collection. I chose the worldwide multiplayer game *Dead by Daylight*, which has more than 50 million players. I chose this multiplayer game because a number of gameplay videos are freely available on the internet. In addition, I realized the in-game texts which players send one another as messages or chats could be a valuable resource for slang research. Therefore, I checked players' post-game text-based conversations to identify slang usage. I then selected eight game matches (four in Japanese and four in English) in which *GG* was used from 20 videos with large numbers of views which I initially browsed. English speakers were from the United States and the length of the videos varied, ranging from 30 minutes to two hours. Most of the Japanese videos were longer since they were uploaded with no editing, while English ones were heavily edited. I counted how many times and who typed *GG* in a chat box after every game. Overall, it was difficult to find videos in which players used *GG* while they were recording because they often moved on to the next match without commenting or turned off their mic.

Results

In the eight matches in which *GG* was used, *GG* was used by 16 gamers out of 40. I found that there were two main differences: usage and meaning of the term *GG*.

First, I will talk about differences in usage. The situations where *GG* was used were very different. Based on the videos, winners tended to text *GG* first in the English videos, while losers did so in the Japanese ones. Specifically, *GG* was used first by winners in four out of four English conversations, and by losers first in two out of four Japanese conversations. Moreover, English speakers were more likely

to reply to *GG* after someone texted it to them. On the other hand, Japanese players rarely responded when someone messaged *GG* to them. After someone texted *GG*, two English gamers replied back with *GG* in two videos. In contrast, no one or only one player replied back with *GG* in Japanese.

These differences in usage also implied differences in meaning. In the Japanese language conversations, I felt that *GG* was used as a compliment. This could be because non-native English speakers might use these English words with a literal or surface meaning. On the other hand, I felt that the English-speaking players used *GG* casually, or as a basic formality rather than as a way of encouraging other players. When I checked a Japanese slang dictionary, it said that *GG* is used to praise other players, literally “it was a good game” (eSports, 2021), but an English one said that *GG* either indicates something is truly good or it can be an insulting slang way of saying, “that was an easy game” (TriggerHappy, 2006). My research implies that there may be differences in usage and meaning. However, the results are still unconvincing. Some trends were not as clear as I had expected, for example, *GG* being used first by only half of the losing players in Japanese matches.

Reflection

Some parts of this research project were easier for me than others. On the one hand, it was easy to decide on the English gaming slang, *GG*, which would be suitable and comparable because it was common for Japanese players to use as well. On the other hand, although we learned how to use corpora and make a research questionnaire in class, the corpora I searched did not cover gaming chats. I also did not have foreign gamer friends who I could ask for help. Eventually, I decided to just watch videos of people playing the game and analyze the conversations by myself. One suggestion for future research would be to compare more videos because four samples in each language is not enough.

I recommend students who are interested in gaming slang to collaborate with gaming friends and record their conversations. I needed to collect the data by myself since the corpora we used in class did not cover it. However, I struggled to find the videos I sought because not all game players uploaded with commentary.

TEACHER: THOMAS- RESEARCH REFLECTION

Adopting Manami and Hinata’s experiences as a lens, I would like to now reflect on my own research experience and objectives: addressing the affordances and limitations of adopting slang as a pedagogical and student research focus, setting out how this experience impacted my ongoing course development, and providing some recommendations for other teachers.

Thematic Variation

First, the most immediate affordance is the sheer diversity of slang available for study. It is not only richly varied in terms of its semantics, morphology, or syntax, but it is so embedded in contexts, cultures, times, and places that it offers an almost unparalleled variability as a subject about which to design an activity, lesson, project, or course. Naturally, this intricacy is a double-edged sword. A limitation of selecting slang as the focus of a pedagogical design is that locating or adapting exemplars which can offer appropriately palatable generalities that are usable by learners is challenging. Educators who are considering similar course designs should be aware of the time-consuming endeavor they are undertaking. Similarly crucial, but labor-intensive, is raising student awareness of the time, care, and sensitivity required to interpret slang meanings and usages. Slang, “is about usage, rather than what is in the dictionary,” I repeatedly emphasized in class. On the other hand, as Manami and Hinata aptly demonstrate in their research reflections, the topic can also generate high levels of engagement due to its immediate cultural or personal relevance. It offers the learner a chance to connect what is being addressed in the classroom to their world. On reading the students’ research outputs as presented in their reflections, I felt validated that the course had not only improved their understanding of the mechanics of how slang fits into the broader picture of English, as with Hinata’s description of grammatical processes that impact loan words, but also heightened their awareness of English as a living language, both IRL (*in real life*) and within an online gaming subculture.

Materials Selection

When planning the course, I knew that I wanted to reflect the dynamism of slang in the course content itself: selecting themes and materials that would cover a wide range of topics, be relevant to the learners, and not merely represent a singular point of view. However, I also wanted to proceed with sensitivity and care. I recognized that a limitation of this topic focus is that slang frequently intersects with issues related to bodies, groups, personal or social identities, so I was cognizant of the need to navigate these topics with due consideration, and to flag any instances of biases, prejudice, or pejorative stereotyping. For instance, in my ordering of topics in the syllabus, those dealing with swearing were placed towards the end, so that proper academic context could first be established. Teachers considering slang as an instructional focus would be well advised to consider similar contextual factors when selecting materials.

Furthermore, I knew that I needed to initially develop my own domain knowledge before selecting appropriate materials for the learners. As such, before and while preparing the course, I referred to an academic text on slang linguistics (Mattiello, 2008), an excellent primer that developed my awareness of crucial issues

to cover. Reasoning that this text in itself would not be an appropriate resource for the undergraduate learners I would be teaching, I went on to carefully select and abridge readings from the pages of books on slang written for a general audience by academic linguists like Julie Coleman (Coleman, 2012) and John McWhorter (McWhorter, 2021), upon which the lecture materials used in the course were also built.

To further enhance the relatability of the material, I decided that the course would cover slang from regions where English is used as an official first and second language, and from high interest, high coverage topic areas like dating, social media, or online gaming. At the outset of the course, I also let the students select one topic to cover during the course. Perhaps anticipatable given the context, the students selected a class on English slang in foreign language contexts, and we looked at the use of slang in Italy and Japan. However, we also went further afield thematically. We looked at and created our own internet memes as a form of digital slang, debating whether they performed the same roles in online social group dynamics as spoken or written slang do in other types of communities. In addition, we listened to and analyzed *Grime* music from UK rapper *Stormzy* to get a sense of how slang functions as part of Multicultural London English (MLE) (The University of York, n.d). This fascinating new dialect is a microcosm of the linguistic mixing, social stratification, and in/out-group dynamics engendered by Britain's colonial heritage that, I felt, makes London a hotbed for slang formation and thus an appropriate exemplar for this course. In her research reflection, Hinata demonstrates her understanding of these slang formation processes by picking up on the same theme from a different context—how an online group with its own distinct subculture might be a productive slang environment. Lastly, as Manami mentions in her reflection, we looked at some published primary research on slang (Hasund & Drange, 2014). This was a means of introducing some basic research issues and methods such as question development, participant selection, or data collection and analysis tools. In her reflection, Manami refers to the fact that this informed her predictions about the kind of results she anticipated, and aspects of her research design mirror those in the published study. Thus, thanks in part to careful materials selection, a major affordance of studying slang is that it fits the course description. That is, it required development of critical thinking and interpretative skills in exploring boundaries of language and communication with multiple other disciplines such as sociology, media studies, or research methods.

Lesson Design

A form of *collaborative strategic reading* was used to structure each lesson, a methodology designed to support language learners in co-constructing comprehension of academic texts in content classes through group work, dialogue

and strategy instruction and deployment (Klingner et al., 2004; Liu et al., 2021). Students were assigned readings for homework and completed a *reading review sheet* (RRS): predicting the content, clarifying unfamiliar terminology, summarizing main points and details, and generating teacher questions with which to quiz their classmates on substantive aspects of the reading (Appendix A). In the following class, the RRS were used for collaborative group and whole class discussions, before I concluded the class with a lecture introducing a new theme which would be further developed in that week's assigned readings. Finally, at the start of the following class, a weekly knowledge check test was also given on the content of the previous lecture. In the introduction to her research reflection, Manami refers to the motivational and content retention roles this reading approach played in her experience of the course. Indeed, the intent behind this lesson design was developing the students' content and language knowledge, alongside the promotion of analytic and discursive skills. When I surveyed the whole class, many reported that analyzing the readings in this way encouraged a more precise and deep engagement with the material. This prepared them well for collaborative discussions that, in turn, enhanced their retention of learning through content repetition and exposure to diverse peer perspectives and interpretations. However, due to the challenging subject matter the flow of the discussions was sometimes attenuated by comprehension problems that required my involvement to resolve, or by over-dependence on high level speakers within the discussion groups to carry the conversation. This finding mirrored those of other scholarship on the technique, which found that additional training in socio-emotional or communicative skills was necessary to facilitate the most effective collaborations (Amjadi & Talebi, 2021).

In later iterations of the course, offered in spring 2023, I made adaptations to the lesson design: more explicit instruction on communication strategies before the discussions, sitting for longer to troubleshoot problems with each group at some point during their conversations, and leading a plenary session and providing the students with additional summaries afterwards to address these issues. What is more, I provided students with exemplar responses to the knowledge check tests, which they analyzed to notice the gap between their own comprehension and the model answers. I plan to continue incrementally improving the course in the same manner.

Research Issues

As Hinata mentions in the introduction to her research reflection, the course covered a different topic area of slang each week. However, I had the idea that undertaking some self-directed primary research on slang in the latter half of the course would be the best way to enhance the relevance of the material for the students. Around mid-semester, students produced a research proposal, initially

brainstorming topic ideas and engaging in guided discussions on research methods in class. In her research reflection, Manami refers to the challenge of isolating an area of focus and question development—a common issue in all research inquiries. After approval and feedback from me, students worked independently in the latter half of the semester, and the course culminated with research presentations. Both the proposal and presentation were assessed. In the selection of the aforementioned aspects of the instructional design, I had hoped that the students would see the explicit connection between the weekly readings and lectures and their own research projects. For instance, in preparing their proposal, students had to answer a background knowledge question: *what do I already know about this topic?* The exemplar is available in Appendix B. In Hinata’s reflection, she draws a direct line between how her curiosity about grammatical and semantic transformations in loan words being raised by the course informed her research theme. While some learners, when surveyed, similarly reported that the lesson design had prepared them well for their slang research proposals by teaching them how to select a topic, gather information, and organize thoughts, others did not see as direct a link. In later semesters (that is, in 2023), in the first half of the course I brought attention more consistently to the upcoming research project and proposal - both of which are assessed. In the latter half, I also allotted some weekly class time for research work and group discussion about project status.

Lastly, I wanted to ensure that the students did not merely rely on anecdotal evidence or personal experience in their investigations. Even if the selection of a research topic was governed by personal interest, it was necessary to introduce some degree of academic rigor or skills development into their research processes. As such, I prepared supportive materials: templates of useful research documentation, sample questionnaires, corpus research tools, and professionally curated slang dictionaries (Green, 2023). However, as Hinata mentions in her reflection, specific resources to suit each learner project are not always available. The lack of an easily searchable gaming language corpus hindered her in this case. That said, working around this problem to find her alternative data collection method of gaming dialogue analysis is exactly the kind of problem-solving skill that is valuable in conducting research. Additionally, in her research results discussion, Manami begins to encounter and recognize the problem of using a non-probability, purposive sampling strategy in quantitative research, leading to issues with representativeness (Berndt, 2020). The challenge for me was balancing content instruction—slang—with just enough research skills development. I think it is important to recognize the pedagogical value of students’ independently tackling the kind of thorny issues that pertain to systematic inquiry: question development, methodology and methods selection, ethics, sampling, and analytical strategies.

However, instructors considering offering this kind of undergraduate slang research project would be well advised to first reflect on what is achievable in their context and scaffold the project accordingly to provide some boundaries.

TEACHER: THOMAS- CONCLUDING REMARKS

In closing, the process of guiding the writing of this article has itself been illuminating. The opportunity to learn in more detail about the experiences and issues, anticipated or otherwise, facing students when tasked to do classroom-based research is welcome. In terms of my iterative course design, it has given me important information that will continue to feed into future planning, classroom methods and assessment, and deepened my understanding of how the students engage with the material. While not every classroom experience can become a research paper, I would encourage any reflective practitioner to find ways to engage in this kind of dialogue with learners that are appropriate in their context. Lastly, I hope the experiences described herein are instructive, and communicate just how rich and worthy a subject slang can be for a course and an undergraduate research project—and that is to really *spill the tea* (tell private or inside information especially of a personal nature) (Merriam-Webster, 2023).

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APPENDICES

Appendix A:

A blank Reading Review Sheet used for weekly solo reading analysis and collaborative group discussions on the course.

Reading Review Sheet

* Reading Title:

BEFORE READING: <u>Prediction</u> Based on the title and headings, I predict this reading is about...	
WHILE READING: <u>Clarify</u> Write words / concepts here from the article that you don't know/ understand.	
Unclear Words/ Phrases: Ex. rank (v) line 4 →	It means... 順位付けする 'Please rank these topics'
AFTER READING:	
<u>Summarize</u> In your own words, summarize the main points and details of the reading. Don't copy whole lines.	<u>Question</u> Write some 'teacher questions' to test your classmates' understanding of the reading.
<u>Extension</u> What is one area of the reading you didn't understand completely/ want to learn more about?	

Student Name:

Appendix B:

An exemplar research proposal used in the course.

Example Research Proposal: Mid-Term MS Language & Communication (6): Slang, a Creative Use of English? Spring 2022, Tom Stringer's Class

1. Proposed Title:

English influence on Norwegian Teenage Slang

2. Why do I want to study this topic?

The English influence on the Norwegian language has steadily increased since the Second World War. Today, Norwegians are often exposed to English in their daily lives, even in kindergarten. Our language is changing. There have been speculations and debates about whether Norwegian will survive as a national language. Teenagers often have the most English education, exposure to English online, and may be highly concerned with social status. We wanted to investigate the impact of English on their written and spoken Norwegian to see if it is under threat from English.

3. What one research question will I investigate?

How frequently are English slang expressions used in teenagers written and spoken Norwegian?

4. Background Review:

- What do I already know about this topic?

We know that exactly how English influences other languages depends on factors like the age at which English is taught in schools, and the degree of exposure young people have to Anglo-American culture. We also know that there may be some social advantages to using English slang for teenagers. Lastly, we know that Norwegian and English use similar writing and spelling systems, and that the two languages are related. This may affect how English slang is absorbed into Norwegian by teenagers.

5. How do I intend to answer my research question?

- What kind of data will I collect? How will I collect it?
- Will I need to talk to people? If so, how will I handle their information?

We will not collect any primary data, so we won't need to collect any new data from people. We intend to use only secondary sources. We will collect written data on English slang usage from two sources. First, from a Nordic research project from 1997-8 on teenage language called Language Contact and Teenage Language in the Nordic Countries (UNO). Second, we will collect English slang data from three recent dictionaries of Norwegian slang, collected between 2005-2007. As for the spoken data, we will analyse two corpora of audio-recorded spoken Norwegian language: the UNO-Oslo corpus of spoken teenage language (1997-8) and the NoTa corpus, collected between 2004 and 2006.

6. What potential problems or difficulties might happen?

- How will I overcome them?

As we will not collect new primary data, we will not have to address ethical issues about consent or collecting personal information. However, we will be searching for English slang words in various databases. When loanwords are absorbed into a host language, spelling may sometimes be altered to make it sound more 'natural'. We think this may make some terms difficult to locate. To overcome this problem, we will search the corpora for the most common words, eliminate all the Norwegian ones, and the English words should remain.