



Learning English Slang Through Social Media: Impact on Learners' Identity and Confidence

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Abstract

For Indonesian EFL students, social media has emerged as a significant source of English exposure, particularly for colloquial language like slang. However, little is known about the kinds of slang that students really pick up and how this affects their confidence and sense of self. This study is to investigate (1) the kinds of English slang that are frequently acquired through social media, (2) how learners' identities are shaped by this exposure, and (3) how it impacts their confidence in speaking the language. Seven ninth-grade students were interviewed and questionnaires were used to gather data using a qualitative descriptive design. According to the findings, learners most commonly pick up brief, repetitive slang, such as acronyms (like LOL and OMG) and hybrid forms of Indonesian and English that are disseminated by influencers. Despite the fact that students frequently come with these terms online, their usage is still restricted and primarily receptive. Exposure to slang somewhat enhances understanding and self-expression, but confidence varies according to social context.

Keywords: Confidence, English Slang, EFL Learners, Identity, Informal Learning, Social Media

Introduction

In recent years, the way students learn English has undergone a significant shift from formal classroom teaching to informal digital environments. Social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube have become powerful tools and places for learners to interact with authentic English usage in real time. Unlike textbooks that emphasize grammar and formal structure, these platforms introduce learners to slang, acronyms, and internet-specific expressions that facilitate contemporary communication practices. This exposure not only enriches

vocabulary but also strengthens learners' sense of belonging in global youth culture, making social media an important site or platform for informal language learning. Although previous studies acknowledge the importance of digital platforms for vocabulary learning and learner motivation, little attention has been paid to how Indonesian EFL learners specifically absorb and use slang through these informal channels or platforms. Most current research does not explore the unique contribution of slang in shaping learners' identity and confidence in communication, but rather focuses on language learning in general or the integration of technology in the classroom. This gap leaves unanswered questions regarding how students' daily digital experiences relate to their formal education and how these unofficial methods might change language instruction in the Indonesian EFL context.

According to the Oxford dictionary, identity refers to the qualities or characteristics that make a person or thing the same, as well as the fact of being who or what someone or something is. It can also mean a sense of self, distinguishing characteristics, or an exact likeness between two things. According to (Alshehri, 2023), classical linguistic anthropological studies on performance and ritual, socialization and status, describe not only types of speech but also the types of speakers who produce and reproduce certain identities through their language use. This can also be seen in sociolinguistics, where social norms and roles have a significant impact on a person's linguistic identity.

Youth slang is a rapidly evolving form of communication. According to Rakhimberdiyeva (2025), youth slang has become central to expressing generational identity and cultural belonging. In the 21st century, increasingly advanced technological developments and global connectivity have increased the evolution and spread of slang. According to William Labov (1972), slang is a form of social variation used by teenagers as a marker of identity and social differentiation. Due to its practicality, slang is not only expressive but also performative, enabling young people to feel accepted, resist, or innovate in their digital and social worlds (Rakhimberdiyeva, 2025).

Based on (Firmansyah, et al., 2024), slang represents informal, non-standard expressions often used within specific social groups to convey cultural identity, humor, and intimacy. Slang words are an interesting language because they offer a language that looks different from its formal form. This can attract a person's attention and understanding of the language and meaning of the word. There are various communication techniques and methods of delivery, especially in the form of language that is easy and interesting to say and pleasant to hear.

In this day and age, slang words play a role in identity, culture, and trends in human social environments (Monderin & Go, 2021). It cannot be denied that with the existence of slang words, human identity can be easily seen and assessed from this. The role of culture in slang words influences how someone understands and appreciates the uniqueness of other countries' cultures. Someone can easily blend in, one of which is by frequently using slang words in socializing and how they

communicate in their daily lives. This reflects how slang words or informal language are used in human life.

Slang words are a significant part of youth culture and have become a label for young people (Madani, N. F., et al., 2025). In the field of education, the use of slang words is quite significant, especially in peer-to-peer interactions in learning assessments. With this statement, EFL learners can show how they learn and study English in learning, the use of slang words in daily communication both at school and in social environments that can be published, such as social media.

Communicating and expressing opinions or sharing experiences can be described through oral communication and virtual communication such as social media (Amalia, F., et al., 2025). Many EFL learners use social media as a means of communication. In addition to being able to broadcast virtually, students can freely use slang words as an identity that reflects their personality. Therefore, it can be seen that EFL learners' confidence in using slang words arises from the use of social media as a communication tool. Although research recognizes the importance of social media in vocabulary acquisition, little is known about how Indonesian EFL learners specifically pick up and use English slang in everyday conversations. Furthermore, there is a disconnect between students' real-world experiences and official English instruction because little is known about how this process affects learners' self-confidence and identity as English speakers.

This study aims to investigate how Indonesian EFL learners get English slang through social media and how the process affects their identity and confidence as speakers of English by referring to the following objectives; Exploring the types of English slang terms that are most often studied by Indonesian junior high school students through social media platform, examining how the use of English slang has an impact on students' confidence in using English, analyzing the way of exposure to the slang contributes to the development of student identity as an English user.

With this aim, here are the research questions that we can ask; what types of English slang are the most commonly obtained by EFL Indonesian learners through social media? How is learning and use of English slang affecting students' self-identity in speaking English? In what ways is slang exposure to form the identity of students as English speakers?

Focusing on the involvement of Indonesian students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in the use of English slang on social media, this study provides new insights into a rarely explored area of language learning, namely the bridge between exposure to informal language in the digital world and students' personal and linguistic development. The uniqueness of this study lies in its analysis not only of slang mastery, but also of the psychological and social impact on students, particularly in terms of self-confidence and identity formation.

Method

The research design used in this research is descriptive qualitative design. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to gain a deeper understanding of how EFL students in Indonesia understand and use English slang through social media. Qualitative methods are used to explore students' experiences, habits and perceptions regarding exposure to English slang on various online platforms, without focusing solely on quantitative measurements. Through this approach, researchers seek to understand the meaning that students give to the use of slang in digital interactions and its impact on their identity and social collaboration.

Participants in this research were class IX (9th grade) students from the schools mentioned previously. The participants were selected because students at this level actively use social media and have quite high exposure to informal English, especially slang. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, where the researcher deliberately selected students who were considered relevant to the research objectives. In the initial stage, students are selected through a questionnaire to identify their habits of using online platforms, their level of exposure to English slang, and their understanding of slang terms. From the results of the questionnaire, several students were selected as main participants to be interviewed in more depth.

The main instrument used in this research is a semi-structured interview guide. This instrument is designed to explore in-depth information regarding students' understanding of English slang, sources of exposure to slang on social media, and how they use slang in everyday communication. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to use pre-prepared questions, but still provide the flexibility to explore new topics or findings that emerge during the interview process. Apart from the interview guide, the researcher also used a questionnaire as the initial instrument for participant selection as well as a voice recording tool to ensure the accuracy of the data during the interview.

The data collection process was carried out in several stages. First, the researcher prepared a questionnaire and interview guide based on theoretical studies and previous research relevant to slang, social media, and learning English as a foreign language. After obtaining permission from the school and approval from the participants, the questionnaire was distributed to class IX students. Based on the results of the questionnaire, several students were selected to take part in follow-up interviews. Interviews are conducted face-to-face or online, depending on the conditions and availability of participants, with a duration of approximately 20–30 minutes for each session. During the interview, all conversations were recorded and the researcher also noted important points to complete the data.

Apart from interviews, this research also involves document analysis, especially regarding students' habits in using various online platforms, such as social media, instant messaging applications, and English-language digital content. This analysis aims to understand the level of exposure and use of English slang by

students, as well as identifying students who have a good understanding of slang. Through a combination of interviews and document analysis, this research also explores how learning slang in the context of social media can influence students' identities as well as their collaborative interactions with peers.

The data that has been collected is analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis process begins by transcribing the interview data verbatim. Next, the researcher read the transcripts repeatedly to gain a thorough understanding of the data. Initial codes were then developed based on important statements related to understanding slang, sources of social media exposure, use of slang in communication, and its impact on students' identity and social interactions. The codes were grouped into main themes, such as understanding English slang, the role of social media in language acquisition, digital identity formation, and collaborative interactions between students.

After the theme was determined, the researcher carried out further review and interpretation to ensure the accuracy of the interpretation. The results of the analysis are then presented in the form of in-depth descriptions supported by direct quotes from participants to increase the validity and richness of the data.

Results

Based on an interview and document analysis collected from a group of 9th grade students studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL), several problems emerged regarding exposure to and use of English slang via social media. Participants were kept anonymous to maintain confidentiality. They show active engagement with several online platforms, especially TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp. These platforms are the main sources where they discover and learn English slang expressions in informal and entertaining contexts, such as memes, short videos and influencer content.

Exposure to English Slang through Social Media

The study reveals that students in Indonesia who learn English often come across English slang on social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and messaging apps like WhatsApp. Most of the time, students find these slang terms accidentally while watching fun videos, looking at memes, reading comments, and viewing posts from influencers. This slang is learned in everyday online settings, not in a classroom, and mainly comes from students' regular online activities instead of intentional study. Because of this, slang becomes a normal part of their online life, even though teachers don't specifically teach it in class.

Types of English Slang Acquired

The results show that the slang that students pick up the most is often short, simple, and commonly used phrases. This includes things like acronyms and short forms such as LOL, OMG, and ASAP, which people see frequently on different platforms. Students also come across slang that mixes English and Indonesian,

which is made popular by local influencers. This type of slang combines English words with Indonesian grammar, making it simpler for students to catch on and remember. These phrases are easier to understand because they are often shown with pictures, tone, and repeated use. On the other hand, more complicated slang that needs a deeper understanding of the culture is not as well-known or used often.

Patterns of Slang Usage

Even though students often see and hear English slang, they don't really use it much themselves. The findings reveal that slang is used more in writing, like when texting friends, instead of in talking with others. Many students shy away from using slang in real-life conversations or formal situations because they are unsure about what it means, how to say it, or if it's appropriate. This points to a difference between the slang they can recognize and what they actually use, where they know slang exists but are not comfortable using it in conversation.

Impact on Confidence and Comprehension

When it comes to confidence, the results show mixed reactions. Some students feel a bit more assured when they understand slang in online materials, as it helps them keep up with discussions and feel part of online groups. However, this boost in confidence doesn't always carry over to speaking English. Feelings of anxiety, worry about making errors, and needing support from friends still affect their confidence. On the bright side, being exposed to slang seems to help with understanding, as students find it simpler to follow English texts, videos, or captions when they know the slang phrases that are commonly used.

Table 1. Summary of Interview & Document Analysis Findings

Finding Theme	Result	Interview & Document Analysis Evidence
Slang Exposure	TikTok and influencers	TikTok videos
Slang Types	Acronyms and short slang	LOL, OMG, IDC
Slang Use	Limited active use	Used with close friends
Slang understanding	Passive understanding	Understood after repetition
Confidence	Context-dependent	Confidants with peers
Barriers	Fear of mistakes	Prefer to stay silent
Identity	Global youth connection	Feel "cooler"

Discussion

Students' Exposure to English Slang through Social Media

The results indicate that Indonesian EFL students in junior high school typically pick up basic, commonly used slang terms, especially shortened versions like ASAP, LOL, OMG, and similar concise phrases. These terms are frequently seen on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, which emphasize brief, caption-driven

communication and rapidly changing content. This is consistent with Stoika and Pitovka's (2025) observation that online communication tends to disseminate simplified slang suitable for quick online exchanges. The information also suggests that students encounter combined Indonesian–English slang, frequently promoted by local online personalities (e.g., *jujurly*).

Sabrina (2021) characterizes this occurrence as a typical aspect of Indonesian online youth culture, where slang that mixes languages becomes more familiar and simpler for students to use compared to purely native-English slang. Students are more likely to recall slang that is repeated, visually prominent, and emotionally charged, such as slang used to express reactions (*IDK*, *IYKYK*). Repeated exposure, visual impact, and the emotional content of social media also play a major role in strengthening students' memory of certain slang.

Slang used to express and convey reactions, humor, or surprise is easier to remember because it often appears in emotionally engaging contexts. This reinforces Pratiwi and Maghfira's (2022) discovery that TikTok encourages the widespread use of slang due to its algorithm for short videos.

Students' Understanding and Use of English Slang

Students mainly understand these slang terms when they see or hear them, instead of using them in actual conversations. This mirrors Dashti and Abdulsalam's (2025) determination that social media enhances understanding skills more than speaking skills for students learning English as a foreign language. The findings show that although students are frequently exposed to slang through social media, this does not directly make them confident in speaking. In this study, students knew several forms of slang but still had doubts, fear of making mistakes, and limited vocabulary mastery prevented them from using these forms confidently. As stated by Krashen (1982), where emotional barriers, such as anxiety and lack of motivation, hinder language acquisition and reduce students' willingness to communicate.

English Slang and Students' Speaking Confidence

The findings also showed that students became more confident while playing online games, where they needed to speak with international players, suggesting that usage, not just exposure, is a factor influencing confidence. This is in line with research conducted by Weldy et al. (2024) that interacting with native speakers can enrich the learning experience for students and this allows individuals to be more comfortable using the language in everyday situations, thus improving their abilities in practical contexts. They stated that they feel cooler when using certain slang with close friends. This suggests that slang increases social confidence more than linguistic confidence.

This is in line with the thinking of Luthfiah and Anita (2025) that although slang may not directly improve language skills, familiarizing students with slang

can help them become more comfortable with using authentic language in informal contexts. There is a gap between passive exposure to slang and active use by students. This is in line with Alharbi's (2023) opinion, namely that TikTok plays a significant role in normalizing slang to express students' passive absorption of English slang. This influences the speech style and self-expression of teenagers, especially students of English as a foreign language (EFL learners).

English Slang, Identity Formation, and Contextual Limitations

Students feel recognized as native speakers when they use English slang as their identity. In line with Jenkins' (2023) statement, slang can encourage and support cultural integration and closeness among students as English as a foreign language (EFL) learner. Based on Blattner & Fiori (2024), exposure to slang through the TikTok platform can generate and create "cool" activities and interactions, thereby strengthening the social bonds of EFL learners. However, this approach lacks focus on contextual understanding and pronunciation. This aligns with the findings, where students feel very confident when using slang with peers but remain hesitant and afraid of making mistakes in formal situations or with new people.

Students feel very confident using slang with their peers, but become hesitant and anxious when in formal situations or speaking with strangers. This shows that the use of slang is still focused on specific contexts and cannot always be used in broader communication situations. Therefore, although English slang is part of the formation of students' social identity and self-confidence, its role in improving formal communication skills is still limited. Therefore, although English slang is part of the formation of students' social identity and self-confidence, its role in improving formal communication skills is still limited and requires structured pedagogical support from teachers in classroom contexts and formal learning environments.

Conclusion

Every language is a tool for interacting with other people. This interaction is supported by language variants, one of which is slang. From our qualitative research, we found that exposure to slang is still passive. The active use of slang is not proportional to the relatively large amount of content that students encounter in informal communication with peers or when playing online games. They often encounter slang in entertainment content, memes, and influencers. Their identity as native English speakers give them the confidence to speak and communicate with peers, especially with international players.

However, the fear of making mistakes and difficulties in pronunciation and articulation, as well as students' lack of understanding of context, make them prefer to remain silent in formal situations, interactions, and communication because they are not accustomed to the presence of people who are not their peers. In general,

students feel “cooler” and interact and connect more with global youth culture because of their acceptance of slang, which does not change their perception as native English speakers.

These findings emphasize the gap between formal learning (grammar) and students' experiences in the digital realm. Therefore, slang can be used to support students' motivation and identity. The role of English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers is recommended to be connecting social media slang through activities such as holding discussions or analyses related to TikTok videos and online games, in which students are given an understanding and teaching of the appropriate context of use to reduce anxiety, fear, and especially difficulties in pronunciation and articulation. In other words, future studies should take a large sample size, compare several regions in Indonesia, and test exercises that focus on slang pronunciation to transform passive exposure into active use.

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