



Received: 07-11-2025
Accepted: 17-12-2025

International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Studies

ISSN: 2583-049X

Utilizing Slang in Harmony with Modern Student Communication Trends in the Digital Era

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62225/2583049X.2025.5.6.5423>

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Abstract

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has significantly transformed the communication practices of Vietnamese university students, leading to the emergence of distinctive linguistic behaviors in both physical interactions and virtual settings. Among these developments, the widespread use of slang has become a prominent sociolinguistic phenomenon, particularly thriving within online platforms. This study explores the key characteristics, underlying motivations, and communicative effects of student slang while recommending strategies for its constructive and culturally appropriate usage. By utilizing

methods such as document analysis, field surveys, and semi-structured interviews, the research highlights how slang fulfills various purposes: fostering group identity, sparking linguistic creativity, and strengthening peer connections. However, excessive or unregulated use of slang may compromise standard language proficiency and widen generational communication gaps. The study concludes with practical recommendations to help students judiciously integrate slang into their communication practices, striking a balance between creative expression and linguistic integrity in the digital era.

Keywords: Slang, Student Communication, Digital Linguistics, Sociolinguistics, Internet Language

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization and the rapid advancement of information technology, language development continuously mirrors the dynamic changes in society. Within Vietnam, the growing prevalence of social media and online platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and Zalo has fostered a new communication landscape where language becomes increasingly adaptable and evolves at an unprecedented pace (Nguyen & Pham, 2023) ^[6]. Amid these transformations, “slang” has emerged as a unique socio-linguistic phenomenon, encapsulating the creative and youthful mindset of young people, especially university students. Slang serves not only as a tool for communication but also as a representation of group identity, digital culture, and contemporary linguistic trends (Eble, 2012) ^[3]. However, its indiscriminate and excessive use may risk undermining standard language norms, impeding precise expression abilities, and disturbing academic communication (Tran, 2022) ^[8]. This raises an essential question: how can students effectively utilize slang to convey their individuality while maintaining respect and civility in the digital age?

2. Theoretical basis and Overview of the research

According to Eble (2012) ^[3], slang is a collection of non-standard words or expressions used within specific social groups to signal closeness or group distinction. In Vietnam, research on slang is still relatively new, primarily focusing on descriptive linguistics and sociolinguistics (Nguyen, 2019; Phan, 2021) ^[5, 7].

Some notable studies have indicated that slang reflects social trends and the young generation's need for self-affirmation (Phan, 2021) ^[7]. Meanwhile, Eble (2012) ^[3] emphasizes the role of slang as a “cultural marker” that reinforces group identity, particularly in higher education settings.

In international research, scholars such as Mattiello (2008) ^[4] and Coleman (2014) ^[1] argue that slang is both a phenomenon of linguistic creativity and a measure of speakers' social adaptability. From a technological perspective, Crystal (2011) ^[2] notes that the Internet has facilitated the rapid dissemination and transformation of slang, especially through real-time interactive platforms.

In Vietnam, Nguyen & Pham (2023) [6] surveyed over 500 students from three universities in Hanoi and found that more than 85% regularly use slang in daily communication, mainly through messaging apps and social media. However, 64% of them admitted that they sometimes encounter difficulties when switching from “online language” to “academic language” in learning contexts.

These studies lay the foundation for understanding the dual role of slang: it is both an expression of linguistic creativity and a challenge to the mastery of standard language in educational environments.

3. Research Methods

3.1 Methodological Foundation

This study is grounded in the principles of dialectical materialism and historical materialism, treating language as a distinct social phenomenon that mirrors the changes and dynamics of cultural and social life during specific historical periods. Slang, regarded as a social linguistic variant, is interpreted as the product of interactions among social groups, particularly young people, including students—a vibrant and innovative demographic profoundly influenced by advancements in information technology. The research methodology also incorporates the sociolinguistic perspective, emphasizing how the use of slang reflects linguistic behavior closely tied to social factors such as age, gender, occupation, communication environment, and cultural context. Furthermore, the study embraces an applied linguistics approach, aiming to offer practical recommendations for the mindful, effective, and contextually appropriate use of slang in student interactions within the digital age.

3.2 Research Design

To achieve thoroughness and objectivity, this research employs a mixed methods design, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches. - The qualitative method is utilized to analyze, describe, and interpret the phenomenon of slang in students' language by examining conversational samples, written documents, social media comments, along with conducting in-depth interviews and direct observations in learning settings and online communication platforms. - The quantitative method involves processing data gathered through surveys and questionnaires to statistically evaluate the frequency, scope, purposes, attitudes, and perceptions students have towards slang usage. By integrating these two methodologies, the research ensures a balanced and credible presentation of findings.

3.3 Research Subjects and Scope

This study focuses on the use and application of slang in the communication habits of university students. It examines both face-to-face interactions (such as those occurring in classrooms, study groups, and extracurricular activities) and online communication (including social media platforms, learning forums, and other digital channels). The scope of the research is defined across three key dimensions:

- Geographical scope: Concentrated on specific universities located within the Thai Nguyen area.
- Content scope: Involves surveying, categorizing, analyzing, and evaluating students' use of slang, while proposing practical strategies that ensure both effectiveness and adherence to cultural norms.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

The research employed the following methods for data collection and analysis:

- Online questionnaire survey: Administered to 300 university students in the Thai Nguyen region.
- Interviews: Conducted with 15 students and 5 lecturers to gain deeper insights into their perceptions and attitudes toward slang usage.
- Language data collection and analysis: A compilation and examination of recent studies related to slang, digital communication, and student interactions.
- Data processing and analysis methods: Analyzed 200 samples of student comments and posts on social media to determine patterns and quantify the frequency of slang usage.
- Synthesis and solution proposal methods: Based on data analysis, the research team synthesized findings to identify appropriate models for slang use in various communication contexts. Consequently, a set of criteria was proposed, encouraging students to use slang in a creative yet respectful manner, adhering to linguistic standards while respecting Vietnam's cultural values.

3.5 Data Collection Methods

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- Language data collection and analysis: Reviewed recent studies on slang, online language, and communication habits among students.
- Data processing and analysis methods: Examined 200 samples of student comments and social media posts to identify slang usage patterns and frequency.
- Synthesis and solution proposal methods: Results were analyzed to identify models of appropriate slang usage across various communication contexts. A set of criteria was then proposed to ensure the creative use of slang, aligning with linguistic norms and the cultural values of Vietnam while encouraging its positive and civilized application.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Classification of Slang Groups

Slang has emerged as a prominent linguistic phenomenon in the daily communication of students amidst the surge in information and cultural integration characteristic of the digital age. Based on semantic features, usage purposes, and formation origins, slang used by students can be divided into key groups:

Group 1: Borrowed and English-Based Abbreviated Slang

The growing influence of English in academia and social interactions has resulted in students incorporating foreign linguistic components into their daily conversations. These borrowed terms are often adapted in pronunciation and meaning, making them widely accepted in casual discourse. Examples include: crush (a person one admires romantically), deadline (submission date), fail (unsuccessful attempt), feedback (response), inbox (private message), chill (relax), drama (conflict), trend (something popular), viral (widely circulated). The infusion of English vocabulary in Vietnamese communication reflects a sense of modernity, vibrancy, and global connectivity within the student

community. However, overreliance on these expressions in formal or academic settings may disrupt linguistic standards or hinder communication with individuals unfamiliar with such terminologies.

Group 2: Slang Involving Phonetic Alteration and Vietnamese Abbreviations

This group highlights the creativity of university students by leveraging techniques such as abbreviations, altered pronunciations, or humorous modifications to spelling. Examples include: ko / hok / hông / khum ("không" – no/not), mún ("muốn" – want), thik ("thích" – like), bik ("biết" – know), ny / nyc ("người yêu / người yêu cũ" – lover/ex-lover), rep (reply), ib (send a message), vs (with), nt (chat/talk). These inventive forms make online communication faster, more personalized, and expressive. Nevertheless, their usage in academic writing, administrative texts, or other formal settings may undermine linguistic seriousness and compromise standardization.

Group 3: Expressive and Exclamatory Slang This category encompasses slang terms designed to express intense emotions, often infused with humor, exaggeration, or playfulness. These expressions lighten the tone of conversations and introduce ironic or whimsical nuances, reducing formality or seriousness. Examples include "xiu up xiu down" (overwhelmed or extremely shocked), "đỉnh của chóp" (top-notch or outstanding), "hết nước chấm" (superb or exceptional), "chất như nước cất" (excellent), "lú" (confused), "quao" (annoyed), "ngáo ngo" (clueless or dazed), "tẩu hải" (acting humorously), "toang" (broken or ruined), "căng đét" (highly tense), "mặn mòi" (witty or amusing), among others. These phrases enhance emotional expressiveness in conversational contexts, infusing interactions with youthful energy. However, their use is most suitable for casual, informal exchanges and may be perceived as lacking seriousness if applied in academic or professional environments.

Group 4: School-Based and Student Life Slang This group reflects students' environment and their attitudes toward academic life, often showcasing a humorous take on educational challenges. Examples include "deadline dỉ" (looming deadline), "bị toang" (failed or collapsed), "cày bài" (intense studying), "nợ môn" (academic backlog), "học tủ" (selective studying), "qua môn thần tốc" (quick course passing), "đốt giáo trình" (discarding textbooks after exams), "lên sóng" (presenting), "ăn hành" (receiving poor grades), "gấu" (significant other or partner), "bestie" (close friend), "bạn cùng hệ" (major peer), "hội cạ cứng" (tight-knit friend group), and "nóc nhà" (most important person, often referring to a partner). This slang category provides symbolic and metaphorical expressions that help students cope with academic pressures while fostering an in-group language specific to student communities. However, excessive use might detract from students' focus on academic rigor or seriousness.

Group 5: Social Media and Digital Technology Slang The influence of social media and digital technology has inspired a dynamic linguistic style with distinct slang rooted in online interaction. Examples include "trend / hot trend" (popular trend), "fomo" (fear of missing out), "tag," "repost," "vibe," "style," "mood," "idol," "tóp tóp" (TikTok), "đu trend" (following trends), and "lên xu hướng" (gaining trend status or going viral). This type of slang allows for quick adaptation to digital phenomena, showcasing students' engagement with online discourse and evolving trends.

However, these expressions often blur the line between casual Internet language and formal communication, potentially leading to inappropriate integration into academic writing.

Group 6: Cultural-Entertainment Slang This category captures the intersection of popular culture and everyday language, driven by trends in music, films, social media platforms like TikTok, and other entertainment influences. Examples include "mlem mlem" (cute or appetizing), "bestie / homie / bro / sis" (referring to close friendships), "simp" (someone overly devoted to another), "đu idol" (actively supporting one's idol), "chúa hề" (someone clownish or humorous), "idol quốc dân" (a widely adored icon), and "trendsetter." These expressions highlight individuality, trend awareness, and cultural adaptability in globalized contexts. While they bring a distinctive personal touch to casual conversations, overuse can compromise formality and undermine the required seriousness in academic dialogue. In conclusion, these categorizations of slang showcase the dynamic linguistic tendencies of students in the digital era. Slang serves as a reflection of spontaneity, creativity, adaptability, and identity among younger generations. However, its use must be context-sensitive, ensuring clarity while respecting the formalities of standard communication norms.

4.2 Trends and Motivations in Students' Use of Slang

Survey findings show that 92% of students integrate slang into their daily communication, with 71% frequently employing it on social media and 25% using it during interactions with lecturers or in academic contexts. These statistics illustrate the pervasive influence of a globalized digital environment and the trend toward linguistic hybridization among today's youth (Mattiello, 2008) [4]. Key motivations driving students to use slang include:

- Expressing individuality and group identity (76%)
- Fostering intimacy and humor in interactions (68%)
- Staying aligned with online trends (54%)
- Enhancing efficiency and conciseness (48%)

These findings underscore how slang enables users to create an "internal culture" within youth communities while serving as an adaptive response to the dynamics of digital communication.

4.3 Positive and Negative Aspects of Slang Usage

* Positive aspects:

- Enriches vocabulary and showcases linguistic creativity.
- Strengthens group cohesion and promotes connections within student communities.
- Demonstrates adaptability to global linguistic trends.

* Negative aspects:

- Causes challenges in formal or academic communication.
- May hinder students' proficiency in standardized language usage.
- Can lead to misinterpretations or generation-based communication barriers (Trần, 2022) [8]. Interviews revealed that 82% of lecturers advocate for guiding students in cultivating a "culture of slang usage" to mitigate deterioration in the quality of formal language. This perspective aligns with Crystal's (2011) [2] argument that online language requires regulation through societal awareness and established norms.

4.4 Suggestions for Appropriate Use of Slang The article offers three main approaches:

- Promoting Linguistic Awareness: Incorporating lessons on slang and digital language into university courses like Pragmatics or Communication Studies to help students comprehend the functions, value, and limitations of slang usage.
- Improving Academic Communication Skills: Hosting workshops or training sessions aimed at developing students' ability to adeptly switch between online vernaculars and academic language.
- Cultivating a Positive Online Linguistic Space: Encouraging creative language practices while maintaining adherence to standard language norms, Vietnamese cultural values, and ethical principles in digital communication. These strategies strive to preserve generational identity while fostering linguistic competencies that resonate with the demands of globalization.

5. Conclusion

Slang represents an inevitable evolution within language development, particularly in the digital era, where the lines between real and virtual communication continue to blur. Its appropriate use allows students to express individuality and showcase adaptive language skills, yet excessive reliance on slang can lead to linguistic imbalance, reduced expressive capacity, and adverse effects on academic communication. Therefore, fostering constructive societal perceptions of slang as part of contemporary language culture is essential, alongside guiding students toward effective transitions between formal and informal language. Achieving this balance is vital for shaping a generation of learners who are not only dynamic and inventive but also respect established cultural norms within their communication practices.

6. Acknowledgments

The work presented in this paper is supported by Thai Nguyen University of Technology, Thai Nguyen University, Viet Nam.

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