



# The Importance of International Exchange Students Learning Informal English

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When students learn English as a foreign language, they typically learn a formal, academic English suitable for communicating with teachers, adults, and in the future, college instructors, and future employers. What they are missing is the informal English that most teenagers speak.

“It is particularly difficult to learn the slang of American youth...In classes, the English that students are learning is a classroom English-academic, adult English” (Olsen 199).



The formal English training they receive is essential in their future as students. But what about their life as an American teenager during their study abroad experience?

Working Thesis: By learning Informal English such as slang, euphemisms, and the meaning of some profanity, international exchange students will gain fluency in English and have overall a more fulfilling experience in their study abroad program.

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Project in progress...

# What the Research Says:

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“A command of figurative language helps English language learners cross the bridge between learning the basic building blocks of language and developing an academic literacy that allows them full access to the content curriculum” (qtd. In Cochran 19).

*Some may argue that informal English is not part of academic English. According to this research, figurative language (or what I'm calling-informal English) is indeed important because it enhances their overall English fluency and can improve their reading and writing by giving them a fuller prospective in English. By understanding informal terms such as some slang or metaphors, ESL can begin to use this in their own writing to improve the quality of their work.*

“These students have the dual challenge of learning the words that comprise the idiom, discovering which idioms are culturally specific, and knowing when the use of certain idioms is socially appropriate” (qtd. in Cochran19).

*There is a difficulty in learning informal English. Slang usually doesn't make complete sense if you take it word for word. You have to find a hidden meaning or use the context to fully understand it. The slang phrase “break a leg” doesn't actually mean to break a leg, but instead “good luck”. An ESL student might take this literally and wonder why someone wants them to get hurt before an event. By understanding the history of this phrase (from German theatre superstition) or better yet, the context, the ESL student may begin to understand what it means and can use it herself.*

“...I was able to understand the instructor’s talk fairly well...[during break] when I wanted to talk with the American students, I could not understand what they were saying at all...I regretted the way I had been taught English in South Korea. So I think those experiences influenced [my current teaching]. Comprehension difficulty was specifically due to English native speakers’ ‘slang’...” (Ahn 696).

*This was taken from a paper on English language studies in S. Korea. An EFL teacher experienced difficulties while studying in America. He understood the academic English but struggled socializing with classmates due to the high volume of slang, dialect, and speed. He brought this back to his EFL classroom in Korea and found a new way to teach. He understood the struggles he faced and wanted to help his students in having a better understanding of the informal English used in America.*

“...Two or three years of ESL education can prepare them only for the surface features of English...Metaphorical language is seldom taught in the beginning stage of second-language acquisition...metaphorical language severely affects students’ reading comprehension and writing performance...It is almost impossible to avoid metaphors in daily life...and without acquiring knowledge about them, nonnative English-speaking students will always be cultural and language outsiders...” (Dong 30).

*EFL does not usually prepare students for metaphorical language or any type of informal English that may not apply to academics. Metaphors are part of our daily lives and live in our reading and writing. To understand metaphorical and informal English will only enhance ESL’s fluency.*

# What the Exchange Students Say:

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“It’s easy, but it takes time to remember all of the possibilities a word can mean...”  
(Chotisorayuth).

“Informal is an important element of communication. Compare [sic] with formal English, informal English is probably used more often by teenagers. For an international student to come to study abroad, socializing is one unavoidable part of their life, and I believe learning informal English beforehand will help them get along with local teenagers” (Chen).

“I have spent 4 years in the states [and] I still don’t get some slangs or jokes from time to time” (Chen).

“[Americans] don’t speak the English we learn in Japan...what we learn is not how native speakers speak” (Taira).

“To know English slang, we possibly can protect ourselves” (Matsuyama).

“It will be helpful when you study abroad to learn informal English. It will increase your speaking and listening skills through talking with native speakers...” (Yoon).

“I think it is quite important to learn informal English, because I think the formal English, which we learn in the school or is used in books, isn't really used in the 'real life' and is a bit different” (F.Grieger).

“It makes the students more confident in their English speaking abilities and of course improves the vocabulary and the overall English level” (H. Grieger).

# Exchange Student (In)Experience:

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“*What’s up?*” “Hmm, not sure...?”

“I almost told my history teacher, ‘*screw you*’ because a classmate said it was a compliment. I didn’t understand so I asked my host mom to explain.”

“One time, I was explaining how I was an only child and I said, ‘I have to play *with* myself’ instead of *by* myself. That was very awkward...”

“*Stop pulling my leg!*” “But I’m not even touching you!”

“In school, some guys were talking about ‘fags’ and I was like-what do you mean by that, what does that word mean? And they were just laughing at me and saying I should google it. So I did...and was really embarrassed to find out it was a mean word for gay people. That made me feel really uncomfortable.”

“What do your *folks* do?”

“...what is ‘folks’?”

\*From an ESL Teacher:

“One of my 2<sup>nd</sup> grade students was having a hard time keeping his bottom in his chair. So I said to this student, ‘You need to glue your bottom into that chair.’ He started to get out his glue and said, ‘Yes, I have glue!’”

“I ended up having an unexpected girlfriend for a day because I didn’t understand the phrase, ‘*go out with me*’ as meaning ‘be my boyfriend’. I had to fix that the next day, she ended up hating me.”

“Am I allowed to say any of these words, I think they are bad: damn, shit, bitch, ass, hell, or fuck?”

# Who is Responsible for Guidance?:

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**\*EFL Teacher?** *Possibly but their responsibility is academic English.*

**\*Sending Organization?** *A possibility considering they are professionals in overseas travel and study abroad programs.*

**\*\*Receiving Organization?** *A better possibility since they are responsible for the students' safety and experience while studying abroad.*

**\*\*\*Regional/Local Coordinator?** *RCs and LCs are responsible for orientations on a smaller scale as the students arrive to their destinations. RCs and LCs could incorporate lessons and activities pertaining to issues of culture and language shock.*

**\*\*\*Host Families?** *Probably the best beginning resource for the students as the host family will be their first major contact and the people who will be there most for the student-hence the name “host family”.*

**\*\*\*Participating High School?** *High schools’ main responsibility is the safety and education of its students, all of its students. If they want a successful exchange student group, they should provide options for all ESL students.*

**\*\*Coaches/Teachers?** *Stating directions in simple terms will be important in the exchange student’s comprehension of school work or activity.*

**\*\*\*Peers?** *Absolutely, but they can be unaware of the importance they will have on the exchange students.*

# Ideas for Learning and Teaching:

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- Natural speaker guided workshops in sending organization.
  - A representative from receiving organizations can assist in a workshop at the sending organization during orientation to prepare students for a life of informal English.
    - This could also be accomplished at the receiving organization's orientation upon arrival.

- Retreats after arrival.
  - Exchange students will be required (or made optional) to participate in an “Culture Retreat” to learn in a relaxed setting guided by Coordinators, host parents, and natural English speaking peers.
- Peer mentor programs.
  - High schools who participate in exchange programs would have a peer mentor program designed to match exchange students to a peer mentor (1:1) to assist in navigating the new school, signing up for events, communications with fellow peers and teachers, and overall, being a first friend to the incoming exchange student.

# Conclusion and Further Work:

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My research shows that exchange students (and immigrant students) struggle with informal English. It is not something they learn in school and they face many struggles as they try to fit in, make friends, and understand this complex yet interesting way of communicating.

My interviews with my own students show that in time, informal English is not that difficult to understand and they can begin to master. Their peers are their best teachers and simply functioning in school, clubs, sports, and just hanging out with friends is the best “informal English classroom” they can get.

This splits my idea 50/50. I believe that informal English should be taught as additional lessons in school (here or there) or as workshops in exchange programs as well as by the adults (host parents) who play a major role in the exchange students’ lives in America. Contrasting to this idea, the students themselves say that they pick up on it while in school just fine.

I would argue that these particular students were fortunate and were able to learn informal English simply by having friends and observing conversations, but not all students are fortunate. For those who struggle, more needs to be done.

More research is needed on ways to teach informal English in a fun and entertaining way for those who do struggle. Since they typically have the academic English required for exchange programs, they should begin a new chapter in English in a way that will be memorable and allow them to become the “fortunate” student like those who are mastering informal English. Some possibilities are lessons led by peers, peer mentors assigned to each exchange student, workshops within the exchange program (either here or in the home country), or even retreats hosted by the exchange organizations as the students are beginning to settle in.

The approach I am taking in my project is to create a “guide” for host parents who will host exchange students for the first time, or for any adult who has regular contact with an exchange student. This “guide” will show the research I’ve done on this subject and the importance it has on the fluency of the students’ English. I will also include some background (history) on slang, euphemisms and profanity to show that it has always been a part of our language and will never just go away. I will touch in the personal preference on using profanity and teaching slang and metaphors and how the students can incorporate this (especially metaphors) into their writing. I may include a section designed for the exchange students which will introduce euphemisms and slang and “quiz” them on what they know and what they’ve learned. This student section will be tentative depending on time and page limits for this particular project. It is a work in progress!

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