

Making sense of English: An introduction to American slang, colloquialisms and idioms

By Shelley Motz

Whazzup? How's it going? Sup, Dawg?

If you are not sure what the above statements mean, you are not alone. Each year, international students like you master the English language only to discover, upon arrival in the United States, that they cannot follow all of the conversations that involve them. The reason: English as a Second Language (ESL) programs cannot adequately prepare them for the dizzying array of slang, idioms and colloquialisms that color everyday speech in America.

“Students can feel lost in conversations,” says Mark Algren, Language Specialist at the Applied Language Center at the University of Kansas. “The language they have learned in a classroom setting is not how people talk.”

He is quick to add, however, that ESL programs provide a good foundation on which students can build their language skills. “I find that students learn a lot of colloquialisms, slang and idioms very quickly.”

According to Algren, the best way to learn them is through everyday speech. Since slang changes so quickly and varies from one region to the next, language classes—particularly

those taking place outside America—cannot really prepare students to understand it.

What will help? Take the following steps and, over time, you will be able to understand what your peers are saying; you may even find American slang, colloquialisms and idioms slipping into your own speech.

Interact with Americans and other native English speakers

As you settle into campus life, you will begin to form new friendships. Although it may seem easier to approach other international students at first, reach out to people from a wide range of backgrounds, including Americans. By doing so you will enjoy rich and rewarding cross-cultural experiences and—as a bonus—you will learn the intricacies of the language from a native English speaker.

Most colleges and universities offer Host Family and Peer Mentoring programs. If possible, take advantage of the opportunities that they present. In addition to meeting Americans who can share their culture and traditions with you, you will meet supportive people who can answer your questions about puzzling phrases, teach you what to say in confusing situations,

What is slang?

According to the Random House Unabridged Dictionary, slang is “very informal usage in vocabulary and idiom that is characteristically more metaphorical, playful, elliptical, vivid and ephemeral than ordinary language”.

For example, a quick internet search revealed that the following are all slang terms for ‘excellent’: phat; obese; shiznit and coolio.

You can find examples of how these words are used in sentences on the website alphadictionary.com/slang.

and let you know when it may be inappropriate to say certain things.

Do the best you can.

You will quickly realize that most Americans want to see you succeed. They are curious about your culture and willing to help you express yourself clearly. Many of your teachers and peers have traveled to other countries in the past. They understand how difficult it can be to speak a foreign language, particularly one with lots of regional variation. They will understand that you are doing the best you can.

What is an idiom?

An idiom is an expression “whose meaning is not predictable from the usual meanings of its constituent elements...or from the general grammatical rules of a language”.

As Mark Algren, Language Specialist at the Applied English Center of the University of Kansas, observed sports idioms are among the most common in everyday speech in the US.

What are some of the sports idioms you are likely to hear?

What do they mean?

- Drop the ball: make an error or mistake
- Get your feet wet: start a new project cautiously
- Know the score: know the facts about something in particular
- Out in left field: offbeat or unusual
- Team player: someone who works well with others to achieve a goal

For more information on American idioms, visit www.idiomconnection.com.

You may even develop a few tricks to help you get by in various circumstances. One of Algren’s colleagues reported that a Brazilian friend considers ‘get’ to be the most useful English verb. “Whenever she does not know what to say she will use ‘get’: I need to get

ready; where do I get the bus; I do not know what to get in the coffee shop.”

Do your research.

If you are curious, google the term {college slang} to find a list of some of the words and phrases commonly used on American campuses. (Google is a common slang term referring to internet research.)

College slang is not a new phenomenon in the US. Every generation—and most geographical regions—have had their own way of expressing themselves throughout the years. For an interesting overview, see *Slang and Sociability: In-group Language Among College Students* by Dr. Connie Eble, Professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Another popular book is *Slam Dunk and Other No-Brainers* by Leslie Slavin.

Listen closely to everyday speech.

Although people who like to research language—and have ready access to the internet—may be interested in reading more about slang, idioms and colloquialisms, it is not necessary. Truthfully, the most effective way to learn about it is to listen for it in everyday speech.

When you hear something unfamiliar, ask someone to explain it to you. If you are not able to ask right away, make a note of it. To the best of your ability, memorize the word or phrase as well as the context in which it was used; write it down if possible. Later, ask a friend, teacher or English tutor what it means.

Avoid dangerous words and phrases.

Learn what words to avoid, especially curses and expletives. English is a colorful language. Many international students find that swear words as well as other derogatory, offensive or insulting terms are used more freely and publicly in the US than in their home country.

International students and ESL teachers can share countless stories recalling embarrassing incidents in which these dangerous words were innocently misused.

The website slangcity.com features a segment called Real English: T-Shirt Slogans. This is an entertaining and informative reminder to make sure you understand what you are saying. On slangcity.com, you can read some of the most popular American t-shirt slogans; then, you can read an explanation of the hidden or double meaning associated with them.

For example, you may want to avoid wearing a t-shirt that says: “If you are what you eat, I am fast, cheap and easy”. Although it initially seems to refer to eating at fast food restaurants, it also implies that the person wearing the shirt is sexually promiscuous.

Keep a vocabulary log.

Algren recommends international students keep a vocabulary log. Purchase a small notebook that you can carry with you at all times. Use it to record unfamiliar words and phrases. By writing a word down as soon as you hear it, you ensure that you will be able to recall it later. You can then research it online or ask a friend to help you understand what it means.

“Keep track of how often you are hearing things and under what conditions,” he advises. “What is the relationship between the people who are saying these things to each other? Friends? Acquaintances? Same sex or opposite? Older or younger? There are so many variables.”

As Algren observes, not all slang, idioms or colloquialisms are widely used. If you only hear something once or twice, you likely do not need to go out of your way to learn what it means. If, however, you hear something daily—in class, on the streets, on television—it is common usage. Understanding its meaning could make day-to-day conversations easier to understand.

Also, there are a number of unspoken rules and customs regarding language. It may be appropriate to say one thing to a peer but completely unacceptable to say the same thing to a teacher or employer.

“Think about how you would ask a favor of a friend, sibling, parent or ruler,” says Algren. Undoubtedly, there would be differences among all of these. “The same is true for the use of slang. There are things you can and cannot use. And, the higher up the social ladder you go, the less slang you can use.”

What is a colloquialism?

A colloquialism is “characteristic of or appropriate to ordinary or familiar conversation rather than formal speech or writing”. Colloquialisms often reflect regional characteristics; a phrase that is commonly understood in the South, for example, may not be recognized in other parts of the US.

For those attending school in one of the Southern states, here are a few examples of colloquialisms from the Southern Slang Dictionary at <http://littlerock.about.com>.

- Bread basket: stomach
- Horse sense: common sense
- Lickety split: very quick
- Chief cook and bottle washer: a person capable of doing many things
- Fit as a fiddle: healthy

For example, students may greet each other by saying “Whazzup?” or “Sup, Dawg?” but they would say “Good morning” or “How are you?” to their teachers.

Be comfortable with ambiguity.

Relax and enjoy yourself. Do not feel pressured to understand every word that is being said. "Students have to get used to dealing with ambiguity," warns Algren. "That's true both inside and outside the classroom language learning setting. Sometimes you just smile and nod, and try to remember what you heard."

In most cases, you will still be able to appreciate the general sentiment of what someone is saying. If not, you can always ask someone to explain it to you later.

Remember, you don't have to use it.

Not everyone uses slang, idioms or colloquialisms. As Algren points out, it depends on who you hang around with.

"Some American students affect a cool demeanor and can be barely comprehensible

because it's all about the vocabulary they use. But others use it far less frequently."

Although it is useful to understand the meaning of words and phrases that are frequently used, you do not have to use slang when you are speaking. Find a way of speaking English that feels natural and comfortable to you. The most important thing is to convey your meaning clearly, not to sound cool or hip while doing it.

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