INSIGHTS INTO ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS' COMPETENCE OF USING COLLOQUIALISM IN COMMUNICATION

Nguyen Duong Ha[*]**, Bui Ngoc Anh, Tran Thi Phuong**
TNU - School of Foreign Languages

ARTICLE INFO		ABSTRACT
Received:	**25/5/2021**	The study aimed at assessing English major students' frequency and competence of using colloquial speech features in their speaking classes at the School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University. The study was conducted with the participation of the fourth-year English major students at the School of Foreign Languages. Survey research was used in this study with the instruments including questionnaires and interview transcripts. The findings of this study showed that the main features of colloquial English speech were used with very low frequency by most of the surveyed students. This implied that most of them were incompetent to use colloquial English effectively with the exploitation of its main features in their speech, so the nature of their communication seemed not guaranteed. The factors influencing students' acquisition of English colloquialism came from both sides: the learner and the teacher. Then, some teaching and learning activities in the correlation with colloquial English style were suggested by the end of the study.
Revised:	**07/6/2021**	
Published:	**08/6/2021**	
KEYWORDS		
Colloquial speech		
Frequency		
Competence		
Nature of communication		
Acquisition		

TÌM HIỂU NĂNG LỰC SỬ DỤNG NGÔN NGỮ THÔNG TỤC TRONG GIAO TIẾP CỦA SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGÀNH TIẾNG ANH

Nguyễn Dương Hà[*]**, Bùi Ngọc Anh, Trần Thị Phương**
Trường Ngoại ngữ - ĐH Thái Nguyên

THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO		TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài:	**25/5/2021**	Nghiên cứu được tiến hành với mục đích đánh giá tần suất và năng lực sử dụng ngôn ngữ thông tục trong các tiết học nói của sinh viên chuyên ngành ngôn ngữ Anh tại Trường Ngoại ngữ - Đại học Thái Nguyên. Nghiên cứu có sự tham gia của các sinh viên năm cuối tại Trường Ngoại ngữ. Những công cụ khảo sát trong nghiên cứu bao gồm phiếu điều tra và bản ghi chép phỏng vấn. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy những đặc điểm chính của ngôn ngữ nói thông tục được sử dụng bởi đối tượng nghiên cứu với tần suất rất khiêm tốn. Điều này có thể nói lên một thực tế là các bạn sinh viên đang còn khá hạn chế trong việc sử dụng ngôn ngữ thông tục vào quá trình giao tiếp. Yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến sự thụ đắc về tiếng Anh thông tục này đến từ cả hai phía: người học và người dạy. Từ đó, những hoạt động dạy và học kỹ năng sử dụng ngôn ngữ thông tục được đề xuất ở phần cuối của nghiên cứu.
Ngày hoàn thiện:	**07/6/2021**	
Ngày đăng:	**08/6/2021**	
TỪ KHÓA		
Ngôn ngữ nói thông tục		
Tần suất		
Năng lực		
Giao tiếp tự nhiên		
Sự thụ đắc		

---

[*] Corresponding author. *Email: duongha.sfl@tnu.edu.vn*

1. Introduction

English nowadays is considered as a tool to help people all over the world communicate and understand one another. However, people who use English as a foreign language (EFL) often find it difficult to communicate effectively with the native and their communication, in most cases, is assessed to be unnatural and even inappropriate with the speaking setting. Even though most native speakers accept such errors in the speech of non-native speakers, they may feel uncomfortable because of the non-native's overly formal language. It is said that "classroom English" or 'textbook English' has often proved less than useful for 'real' communicative purpose [1]. In the native's communication process, real people use mostly 'the language of the streets' that consists of various colloquial or informal expressions [2] and it is the non-standard or colloquial expressions that are the uniqueness of everyday English used by the native [3]. This feature mainly creates the naturalness of real everyday English, about which many non-native people may not know.

There have been different studies about colloquialism. The first one comes from Trimastuti [4] who showed the impact of social media through students' writing on *WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram*, etc. The result of study showed teenagers used slang or colloquial words only in their circle. The second research is from Amir and Azisah [5]. They conducted the research about gender analysis on slang language in students' daily conversations. In this study, they categorized the use of slang words between male and female. Based on the research result, male and female students used slang language in different ways and also frequency. Similarly, according to Shahraki & Rakesh [6], males used slang words and expressions more than females. By using these expressions, males could display their toughness, representing their masculinity society; in contrast, females usually were more cautions than males in their choices of styles. Thirdly, the study by Salma [7] revealed that the most frequent slang words that were used among teenagers were acronym, loan, and substation.

Although studies have been conducted concerning colloquialism, most of them focus mainly on slang language. Working on the relationship between other features of colloquial form of English language and the learners' competence of making conversations is rare. Therefore, to explore whether or not English is used naturally and appropriately by English major students at the School of Foreign Languages, the study on colloquial English to make conversations in their speaking classes was carried out. This study put three research questions as following.

✓ How frequently do English major students at the School of Foreign Languages use colloquial English in making conversations?

✓ How does the frequency reflect the students' competence of speaking colloquial English?

✓ What factors influence the students' acquisition of colloquial English in their speaking classes?

To do this, the definition and several main features must be clarified at the onset.

1.1. Key terms: Colloquial/ informal/ casual English

Colloquialism is a familiar style used in speaking and writing. Similarly, informal speech means informality and not much strict attention to set forms. In The Five Clock [8], the colloquial comprises both the consultative and the casual style. The casual style is used for friends and acquaintances, and is marked by frequent ellipsis and slang.

In terms of the using context, colloquial language is informal language that is not rude, but would not be used in formal situations. It is the language of private conversation, of informal letters, etc. It is the first form of language that a native speaking child becomes familiar with. Because it is generally easier to understand than formal English, it is often used nowadays in public communication of a popular kind; for example, advertisements and popular newspapers mainly employ colloquial or informal style [9].

1.2. Main features of colloquial English speech

1.2.1. Phonetic and phonological features

It is realized that 'informal English is sloppy and a victim of "lazy tongues" [10]. Spoken English of all registers is characterized by reductions of sounds and ellipses. 'Reduction of sounds is characteristic of informal spoken English. Vowels drop or reduce to schwa, and other sounds change or blur; for example, 'can' /kæn/ has the vowel dropped to /kən/, 'how about' is reduced to 'how'bout', 'madam' to 'ma'm', 'and' to ''n', 'every' to 'ev'ry', etc. We do not pronounce words letter by letter with the written form. "Gotta", "gonna", and "wanna" look strange to students when they are printed in a dialogue, yet the students hear these forms all the time. Referring to Weinstein's listings on reduced forms in her book "Whaddaya say" [11], approximately 95 percent of the reduced forms are function words.

1.2.2. Morphological features

Weinstein [11] says, 'in speech, people take shortcuts. However, there is not the same danger of misunderstanding as there is in writing. The context is clear and comprehension can be easily verified since the audience is present.' For example, a university student's saying such as 'I've an eight in the univ tomorrow' (an eight = the class that starts at eight, univ = university) will be not in danger of being misunderstood if it is placed in the specific speaking context.

1.2.3. Syntactical features

Václav Řeřicha [12] explores that when native people use colloquial language, they tend to use active rather than passive structures. For example, *'I'll do this task'* is much preferred rather than *'this task will be done by me.'*

When native people talk to each other, ellipsis tends to be used all the time. This language phenomenon refers to the omission from a clause of one or more words that would otherwise be required by the remaining elements [12].

The other most prominent syntactic features of colloquial English are active voice prevalence in the speech, coordination (parataxis) prevailing over subordination, incomplete structures, chunks of phrasal and clausal structural units. In other words, loosely organized structures with conventions of "standard" language often being violated are much used and preferred by the speaker [12].

1.2.4. Lexical features

Colloquial language uses specific vocabulary, normally short and simple words of Germanic origin rather than of Latin origin. Interjections such as 'oh', 'yeah', 'gee' are often much exploited. In everyday language, the native tend to add discourse markers or fillers while they are speaking, for example 'kind of', 'sort of', 'like', 'you know', 'well', 'actually' and parenthetical elements 'indeed', 'sure', 'no doubt', 'no way', 'obviously', 'perhaps, 'maybe'. In most conversations, conjunction 'and' is frequently used. Hesitation markers are often used in colloquial English speech [13]; for example: uhm, err, uh huh, etc. After all, hesitation markers serve an important function: they give a person time to think and hold the floor [14]. Conversational English speech is also marked by certain modifiers that are not found in other registers. 'Pretty' and 'real' used as adverbs are two common examples. Other modifiers, such as 'a lot' and 'a bit' find their way into the speech of native speakers easily [15].

2. Methodology

A random sample of 146 students (107 females and 39 males) majoring in English at the School of Foreign Languages – Thai Nguyen University participated in the study. The participants were fourth-year students studying in five different classes of course 40. Their

English was generally assessed to be at the advanced level. This general assessment was based on the requirements of their language skills in the fourth academic year when they had to achieve English oral/ written proficiency at advanced level. The assessment was also drawn through students' long duration of studying English. Most of them had been exposed to English as a foreign language for more than 10 years on average.

Another sample consisted of 2 Vietnamese teachers and 3 American teachers. They were currently teaching spoken English to the classes at the School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University. This sample was selected to attend semi-interviews with the researcher. All of the teachers held an M.A. degree. They had the experience of teaching English for 5 years at minimum and for 10 years at maximum in Vietnam.

The first instrument used in this study was questionnaires which were administered to students to gather information of the participants' language background, their frequency and competence of utilizing colloquial English. All students were given instructions in Vietnamese and a brief explanation about the questionnaire. Participants were advised that they could ask the researcher if they did not know the meaning of a particular word or understand a particular concept, etc. After that, the questionnaire was completed by every participant. On average, it took them 20 minutes to fill out all of the information in the questionnaire.

Based on the results collected from the assessment, the researcher carried out some semi-interviews with the native teachers and non-native teachers to know what affected the students' competence of using colloquial English speech in their classroom. The interviews were conducted either after the speaking lessons or at the break time. The interviews were then transcribed into texts.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Frequency of applying colloquial English by the surveyed students

The following tables reported back the results collected from the assessment scale in students' questionnaires.

Table 1. *Analysis of phonetic features used in students' speaking classes*

Phonetics \ Frequency	Almost always	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
Reduced speech	0%	0%	33.6%	66.4%	0%
Fast speech pace	0%	0%	16.4%	77.4%	6.2%
Elision	0%	0%	0%	25.3%	74.7%
Linking	0%	8.2%	69.9%	21.9%	0%
Stress	0%	23.3%	66.4%	10.3%	0%
Intonation, rhythm	2.1%	25.3%	46.6%	22.6%	3.4%

It can be seen from table 1 that most of the surveyed students seldom used reduced speech in making conversations and the rest number of the students sometimes did that. Many of them admitted that the most preferable reduced form in their speech was yeah/yep. The others found it quite difficult to use reduced speech because their speech pace was not fast enough to drop vowels or reduce them to schwa, and make other sounds change or blur in careless pronunciation.

This fact was solidly proved through the figures showing student's frequency of using fast speech pace. 77.4% of them seldom spoke with fast speech. A small number of the rest students reported that they sometimes or even never used such pace when speaking in the classroom. In terms of elision, a prominent phonology feature to characterize colloquial English, the result pointed out that the majority (74.7%) of English major students never used elision when making conversations and that this feature was just used occasionally by the others.

The collected results also demonstrated that a large number of students sometimes spoke English with linking, stress, intonation and rhythm.

In brief, the results collected from table 1 showed that not many English major students used the phonetic and phonological features of colloquial English speech frequently in their speaking classes.

Table 2. *Analysis of morphological features used in students' speaking classes*

Frequency Morphology	Almost always	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
Abbreviated forms	0%	0%	19.2%	67.1%	13.7%
Contracted forms	0%	15.8%	77.4%	6.8%	0%

As shown in table 2, in terms of abbreviated forms, the majority of students seemed unfamiliar with this item as a token of colloquial language identity. Thus, 67.1% of these students chose "seldom" as their immediate answer. Further talking about this, some of them expressed their doubt of these "new forms" because they were just acquainted with "standard full forms" in their course books and they did not know how to use these words correctly.

With regard to contracted forms, all the students were familiar with them but just 15.8% of these students often used them in their speaking classes. A large number of the surveyed students used contracted forms with less frequency, so 84.2% of their choices were for "seldom" and "sometimes". Explaining this, several students said that they were much influenced by the full forms in the written texts because when given time to practice on any topic, they often write down every word in their conversation. Furthermore, they could not gain fast speaking speed, so it would be easier for them to pronounce word by word in their speech.

To sum up, many English majors tended to use full forms frequently in their speaking classes. The reason for that choice mainly originated from their habit of speaking along with written texts or great influence of their course books.

Table 3. *Analysis of syntactic features used in students' speaking classes*

Frequency Syntax	Almost always	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
Ellipsis	0%	66.4%	23.3%	10.3%	0%
Active voice	86.3%	13.7%	0%	0%	0%
Coordination (Parataxis)	23.3%	76.7%	0%	0%	0%
Short or chopped and simple sentences	45.9%	54.1%	0%	0%	0%

As can be illustrated from table 3, the most prominent syntactic features of colloquial English occurred in English major students' speech with high frequency. Among these features, active voice was used with the highest frequency. The majority (76.7%) of students often tended to organize and express their ideas in coordinate clauses with the help of coordinating devices such as and, but, so. The rest 23.3% of the students even showed the most frequent use (almost always) of this feature in their speech. Regarding short or chopped and simple sentences, 100% of the surveyed students chose "almost always" and "often" as their commonly used feature in their conversations. In terms of ellipsis, the number of students expressed as 66.4% of the total who often used this feature was much higher than those who sometimes and seldom used it.

Summarily, in appearance, there seemed to be no challenges for students to use the syntactic features of colloquial language, but in fact, it was due to their fear for making mistakes, not for gaining the naturalness in their speech. That is the reason why many students tend to write down their whole conversations and practice by learning them by heart. Therefore, in reality, it was much doubtful whether English major students used such features with high frequency in an appropriate way or not.

Table 4. *Analysis of lexical features used in students' speaking classes*

Frequency / Lexicology	Almost always	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
Interjections	15.1%	54.1%	29.4%	1.4%	0%
Fillers	0%	0%	23.3%	65.1%	11.6%
Parenthetical elements	0%	0%	4.8%	78.1%	17.1%
Hesitation markers	0%	12.3%	17.8%	69.9%	0%
Idioms, slang	0%	0%	0%	2.7%	97.3%
Phrasal verbs	0%	0%	8.2%	38.4%	53.4%

Statistics in table 4 have shown that interjections were exploited in the students' speech with the highest frequency. 69.2% of the total almost always and often chose this feature as a means of expressing their feelings in their classroom speaking.

With regard to fillers, hesitation markers and parenthetical elements, the majority of these students respectively showed the nearly lowest frequency (seldom) of using these lexical features in their speech. One explanation for that was due to their "too much careful preparation" for their conversation without any improvisation (Miss Stephanie, American lecturer). The fact showed that most of the students too much focused on the message-oriented speech through their well-prepared written texts; as a result, they neglected features of interactional speech.

In terms of idioms, slang – the most prominent features of colloquial lexicology, nearly all (97.3%) of English major students reported that they had never used them before. The same frequency occurred in the use of phrasal verbs by these students, among whom 53.4% never, 38.4% seldom and 8.2% sometimes exploited phrasal verbs in their speech. This may be the most difficult feature for both the learning and teaching of English as a foreign language. Most of the students admitted that they found it difficult to understand and remember the idioms or slang. Moreover, they did not have any chance to practice them in the classroom. The native teachers added that they wanted to introduce some common idioms and slang to their students but they were not be arranged in a systematic teaching curriculum, so the students were reluctant to listen and immediately forgot them. In summary, lexical features seemed to be the biggest challenge to English major students in their conversation practice.

3.2. Assessment of students' competence of using colloquial English in the classroom

As can be seen from the assessment of students and the teachers, colloquial English is not only unfamiliar but also challenging with almost all of the students. Therefore, both the students and teachers assessed students' competence as "poor", and "very poor". Just a small number of students considered themselves as "fair" colloquial English speakers. These students were some of the best students with very high learning results in the university. However, they were not provided with sufficient sociolinguistic knowledge and some of them reported that this was the first time they had heard of the term "colloquial English" and its main features. They were not informed of these features at the classroom, so they were quite eager for getting them to cope with real life situations better and understand native English deeply.

3.3. Factors influencing students' competence of using colloquial English in the classroom

3.3.1. Learner factors

1- Students' lack of necessary language condition: From the interest distribution of four language skills, listening skill received the least attention from the students. This may cause many difficulties to students when they are exposed to authentic language used by the native English speaker. Listening is considered the most crucial condition toward students' use of

colloquial English because it provides them with authentic input materials. Therefore, this may be regarded as the issue worth considering.

2- Students' little exposure to colloquial English in non-native setting: The evidence showed that only 7.5% of the surveyed students had heard of the term "colloquial" before and most of them had never been taught how to speak colloquial English with the efficient use of its main features.

3- Students' misleading perceptions of colloquial English speech: In the questionnaires delivered to students, most of the collected results reflected the students' misleading perceptions of the roles, contexts, and specific features of colloquial English.

4- Students' attitudes towards colloquial English use: Although many students showed their desire to learn colloquial English speech, their desire was often attached to another condition that it must help them better cope with real life situations or it must help them become a good English speaker. Thus, this condition will become an obstacle to demotivate students' learning if the condition is not satisfied immediately because it requires time and other conditions for them to become good colloquial speakers.

5- Students' age: Most of the FLF students' age ranges from 21 – 23, so the age may prevent students much from getting the new style due to their "fossilization".

3.3.2. Teacher factors

1- Lack of exposure to authentic language: Because of living in a non-native setting with English considered as a foreign language, many teachers have limited exposure to how colloquial English features really work in the reality.

2- Misconceptions or unawareness about colloquial English speech: Some teachers, especially Vietnamese teachers, have not captured the main features of English colloquial English speech. They could hardly give an exact definition of the term because of their misconceptions or their unawareness of this issue. They even thought that colloquial English was not so important to English learning.

3- Deficiency in sociolinguistic competence: Because of the traditional teaching method (grammar-translation), academic English with the main focus on grammar, so the teacher lacks much sociolinguistic knowledge. This is the main limitations in the teaching of idioms and slang.

4- Little time and lack of expertise in material development: Most of the teachers are young and have limited experience in materials development, so it requires time and further compiling work to design the syllabus.

5- No room for teaching colloquial English in the speaking class: This is the main issue of the American teachers because they were afraid that teaching idioms, or phrasal verbs would be regarded as "out of the teaching goals."

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the main features of colloquial English speech were used with very low frequency by most of English fourth-year major students at the School of Foreign Languages. This implied that most of them were incompetent to use colloquial English effectively with the exploitation of its main features in their conversation. The factors influencing such inefficiency came from both sides: The learner and the teacher. With the focus of teaching students how to achieve competence of using colloquial language, teachers should teach students with the supplement of authentic spoken materials. The teachers should focus on the listening skill with more authentic content; for example, they can get students to listen to the peer conversations of the native or to watch the film in the classroom. The aim of these materials is to provide students with authentic language used by the native speaker. The topics should be chosen in accordance with the topics they are learning in the official learning hours. During the semester, the teachers should highlight the significance of colloquial English speech as well as the main goal of these

classes so that students know what they should achieve at the end of the semester. Together with teaching the language of conversation, we must teach the social parameters. Conversational strategies include knowing when to speak, what topic to speak about, and other cultural rules. However, the sociolinguistic aspects of language can be difficult to teach because the rules are subtle and not explicitly explained in any rule book of conversation. Therefore, the features of informal English can be taught within the context of dialogues. While tape recordings are an invaluable tool for bringing real speech into class, students should also have the opportunity to read the dialogue aloud. Textbook dialogues should not, however, be practiced to the point of memorization. Instead, they should provide a jumping-off point for role plays and discussions.

REFERENCES

[1] G. Broughton, C. Brumfit, R. Flavell, P. Hill and A. Pincas, *Teaching English as a Foreign Language*. Routledge Education Books, 1980, p.35.

[2] L. P. Engkent, "Real People Don't Talk Like Books: Teaching Colloquial English," *TESL Canada Journal*, no. 1. pp. 229-231, 1986.

[3] A. Suksriroj, "A Study of Informal English Used in the Movie the Holiday," B.A thesis, Malaysian University, 2019.

[4] W. Trimastuti, "An Analysis of Slang Words used in Social Media," *Journal of Dimensions of Education and Learning*, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 64-68, 2017, doi: 10.24269/dpp.v5i2.497.

[5] K. Amir and S. Azisah, "Gender Analysis on Slang Language in Students' Daily Conversation," *English, Teaching, Learning, and Research Journal,* vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 229-243, 2017, doi: 10.24252/Eternal.V32.2017.A10.

[6] S. H. Shahraki and A. E. Rakesh, "Check This One Out: Analyzing Slang Usage Among Iranian Male and Female Teenagers," *English Language Teaching Journal*, vol. 4, no. 2, pp.198 - 205, 2011.

[7] A. Salma, "Gender Influence on Slang Used by Teenagers in Their Daily Conversation at School," *Passage ETLR Journal*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 63-70, 2016.

[8] M. Joos, *The Five Clock*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967, p.29.

[9] G. Leech and J. Svartvik, *A Communicative Grammar of English*. Longman, 1995.

[10] G. Brown, "Teaching and Assessing Spoken Language," *TESL Talk: Conference Proceedings TESL 81*, II, 1982, pp. 3-13.

[11] J. N. Weinstein, *Whaddaya say?: Guided Practice in Relaxed Speech*. Longman, 2017, pp. 15-45.

[12] V. Řeřicha, "Colloquial Style Course," M.A thesis, Czech University, 2016, p.32.

[13] G. Brown and G. Yule, *Teaching the Spoken Language: An Approach Based on the Analysis of Conversational English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 4.

[14] B. P. Bradford, "The Acquisition of Colloquial Speech and Slang in Second Language Learners in EL Paso, Texas," M.A thesis, University of Texas at El Paso, 2010.

[15] L. Karimi, "Effect of Using Colloquial versus Standard English to Teach EFL Listening Comprehension," *International Journal of Listening,* vol. 35, pp. 100-109, 2018.