

A Study on the Language Localization Process of English for Chinese Students Studying in the UK: A Case Study of Slang

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Abstract: With the end of the pandemic and a further increase in the number of Chinese students studying in the United Kingdom (UK), many Chinese students are confronted with a range of challenges in terms of English proficiency and cross-cultural shock. As the creativity of Internet cyber buzzwords is high, the occurrence and variability of slang are very high too. Through questionnaires and interviews with fifty-four Chinese international students on their use of slang in the UK, this study summarizes the characteristics of contemporary Chinese international students' learning and use of British slang and explores the relationship between the use of British slang and the language localization of Chinese international students. According to the results of this research, 70% of the interviewees have come into contact with British slang in their daily lives, but have not specifically studied or thought about its specific role in language localization, so the promotion of language localization by learning and using British slang is worthy of further study. This study provides researchers with a theoretical basis for optimizing the learning method of slang by Chinese international students and opens up ways to promote the language localization of international students.

Keywords: British slang; Overseas Chinese students; Language localization; International students in the UK

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1. Introduction

Some scholars consider slang to be a varied lexical field of vivid words and phrases that embodies the characteristics of various social and professional groups when communicating within certain speech communities. Simultaneously, Baratovna also considers Slanguage to be a language characterized by slang, defined as a variety used by speech communities ^[1]. Although slang has been controversial for years, some linguists believe that the source of slang is a unit of various jargon, representing a collection of popular but unqualified words and phrases that are widely used in media language and colloquialism. Slang is always overlooked because of its lexicographic registration, but Rusfandi reckons that slang is integrated into the local culture and is part of it, and Guzel believes that slang is a rich source of linguistic innovation, with communicative effects, with its unique prosody and appropriate expression of stylistic characteristics ^[2,3].

Based on the prior studies, the term slang used in this study is defined as an informal language that is not commonly found in upper-class formal communication, is ubiquitous in mass life and entertainment, and is constantly enriched and expanded according to social development. Slang has the role of identity and can sometimes represent the expression style of certain social groups. Besides, the language localization process in this research only refers to the use of local language by foreign students who study in a non-native country. In the context of this research, the language localization process is the process by which Chinese students are not familiar with local English expressions at the beginning to be able to communicate in English authentically.

The large number of Chinese students in the UK has to face many cross-cultural conflicts, causing a challenging language localization process. Cross-cultural pressures are generally most acute when international students arrive in their destination country and diminish with the length of their studies. They may encounter challenges in the academic environment as they are unfamiliar with the education system. Another social challenge in the localization process is the language barrier, as English is a second language for international students. In a past survey, local students in the UK had the highest percentage of students obtaining a good degree at 69%, while only 34% of Chinese students received a good degree ^[3]. Language proficiency also has an impact on the loneliness of Chinese students, with the majority of Chinese students feeling lonely during their studies. Hence, this study aims to examine the situation of slang usage among international Chinese undergraduates who are studying in the UK and corresponding learning strategies to better localize within the UK.

2. Literature review

From a sociolinguistic perspective, slang is a complex, difficult, and unattainable linguistic phenomenon ^[3,4]. Its emergence is always caused by changes in the social, historical, and cultural life of different linguistic communities ^[3]. Although many linguists believe that slang is not very accepted in society, the use of slang expressions in movies, television, newspapers, and magazines has increased significantly in the lives of young people ^[2,5]. The interpersonal function is the most basic function of language, and as for the interpersonal social function of slang, the most important point is to promote communication between people ^[6]. The younger generation is using and creating slang more frequently. Students often use slang in writing in daily conversations through social networks and WhatsApp apps ^[7]. In recent decades, there has been more research on slang from a sociolinguistic perspective, and they are almost divided into two large categories.

The first category is the use of slang in the local language by native speakers in their motherland. This category has been studied in different countries, with the largest proportion of slang research, such as the United States. American slang is one of the language varieties in American English, which argues that American slang is characterized by humor, conciseness, originality, and stability ^[8]. The study conducted by Zhou found that two social functions of American slang exist in general American speakers, the first of which is the pursuit of self-identity, and the second is to express the emotional feelings of slang users for their psychological needs ^[6]. Regarding the slang usage of young people in Asia and Africa, Hendrajat studied the phenomenon of Indonesian university students being influenced by slang and argues that using slang increases Indonesian creativity, but also decreases the quality of Indonesian language formalism ^[9]. Similarly, in the sociolinguistic research of Egyptian slang conducted by Falaky, the social impact of Egyptian slang provides various opportunities for marginalized social groups to express their novelty and uniqueness ^[10]. In brief, the studies in the first category reveal that slang has local features when it is used by different language speakers, especially young native speakers.

The second category is about the use of slang by non-native language speakers. Pongsapan focused on the slang usage in Indonesian university students who are non-native English speakers in an English study program ^[11]. As for the reasons for the slang use, Pongsapan found seven reasons, and the prime reason is to create new words to enrich the language ^[3]. Laganhon compared the relationship between Philippine English as Foreign Language (EFL) students' familiarity with Facebook slang and their English writing and reading skills through a group study ^[9]. The results of the study indicated that there was no significant relationship between students' familiarity with Facebook slang and their reading and writing skills ^[12]. Dinçay suggests incorporating slang into the Turkish EFL classroom, which he believes is the only way to increase young learners' confidence and increase interactions with native speakers ^[13]. Murray argues that with correct knowledge of the language, it is difficult for second-language English students in foreign countries to understand the different cultural idioms, slang, and black languages that are so popular in today's American mass media ^[14]. Regarding international students, García shows that slang is a vocabulary known and mastered by native speaker groups, but little research has focused on the topic regarding the situation of non-native speakers of slang. García examines the level of knowledge of L2 learners of both English and Spanish and analyzes the impact of the study abroad period on the first group of learners. This study shows a higher level of ignorance of slang among Spanish L2 students ^[15].

Language reflects the features of the nation. The reflection can be seen in different aspects of a language system: vocabulary and sentences (including proverbs and slang). Intercultural barriers exist in terms of rich vocabulary and sentences. Although words and word meanings are almost identical, sentences made up of these words express different meanings. This is difficult for Chinese students to understand. As this study suggests, Chinese students are hindered in reading and everyday conversations that include slang ^[16]. Chinese scholar Wang studied the mistakes made by Chinese English learners when understanding unfamiliar English slang ^[17]. The study aimed at English majors in China, and although the research group is different from this article, Chinese students in English majors also face the problem of unfamiliarity with English slang in the next stage of their studies. To solve this dilemma, Wu used a similar research method to this study for non-English majors and proposed that English slang teaching in an English classroom in an appropriate way can help students deeply understand the cultural connotation and cultural differences in English vocabulary ^[18].

Previous studies have not mentioned the use of slang by Chinese international students in various countries, nor has there been any mention of the concept of language localization. Based on the increasing number of Chinese students in the UK, this research fills the gap on the impact of international students' use of slang on language localization.

3. Research question

- (1) What are the features of student slang used by international Chinese undergraduates who are studying in the UK?
- (2) How do Chinese students learn slang in the UK?
- (3) What effect does slang have on localizing the UK for Chinese students?

4. Methodology

The study adopted mixed methods of quantitative and qualitative approaches. To be specific, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were conducted. To obtain the most realistic and objective data, in the first stage, a macro survey of 51 Chinese students in the UK was conducted by a self-designed online questionnaire

to obtain the familiarity of Chinese students of different ages, genders and learning states with British slang. Simultaneously, the online questionnaire inquired them about their first acquaintance with British slang, the situation of learning slang and using slang, and then combine the self-comment of their language localization. In the second stage, to get more precise information, four international students with different duration of studying in the UK were selected to conduct a one-on-one interview, mainly focusing on the experience and impact of using slang in daily life, the specific process of learning slang, the reasons for choosing different slang learning methods as shown in **Table 1**.

The interview was conducted with the consent of the interviewees. The interviews were conducted in Chinese to bring the Chinese interviewees closer to each other so that they could better understand our questions. The questionnaires were distributed online and were mainly conducted on a one-to-one invitation basis. The interviewees consisted of 25 male students and 26 female students, including four students under the age of 18, 27 students aged 18 to 22, and 20 students aged over 22. More than half of them were completing undergraduate degrees, 15 were completing postgraduate degrees and eight were studying for a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD). 27 students had studied in London for one to three years, 10 students had studied in London for three to five years and 14 students had studied in London for more than five years. 45% of the respondents were studying arts, 41% were studying science and technology, and 11% were studying business.

Table 1. The demographic information of the four interviewees

Code	Age	Gender	University
Interviewee A	20	Male	University of Oxford
Interviewee B	22	Male	University College of London
Interviewee C	19	Female	University of Westminster
Interviewee D	22	Male	University College of London

5. Results and discussions

5.1. The features of student slang used by international Chinese students who are studying in London

The primary feature is that Chinese students are passive when it comes to studying and using London slang, although slang is related to social class, age, education, and ethnicity. According to the questionnaire, 78.43% of respondents had not learned slang specifically to integrate into British culture, even though 50.98% of them answered “yes” when they were asked about whether they had difficulties in communicating with local people if they cannot use slang. In the one-to-one interviews, respondents reported that the social impact of learning to use slang varies from person to person, as Interviewee C said “The social impact depends on the individual. Some people spend most of their time with their Chinese student friends, so it doesn’t matter if they learn slang or not. But for me, it has an impact, if I know a few words I can talk to my friends with fewer barriers.” By contrast, some international students are not affected by slang, as Interviewee D said “It doesn’t affect me much. My friends are all Chinese people. I don’t have any chance to use it. I do speak bilingually when I talk to my friends, but it’s just some simple slang that I’ve used for a long time.” Although the first time Interviewee D met slang was with locals, since most of Interviewee D’s friends are Chinese, even if he ever encountered a situation where communication was affected because he had not mastered slang, it would only have a small impact and would not affect Interviewee D’s normal social life. The situation in Interviewees C and D shows that if a Chinese student does not actively approach local people or seek more social interaction with local

people, then he or she has no need to use slang and will not learn it further. It means the factor of social patterns has a direct impact on the motivation of using slang.

5.2. The use of slang by Chinese students is affected by the spread of slang itself.

As shown in Table 2, the slang in the survey is divided into three categories from top to bottom, they are slang words that appear frequently in interviews or conversations among Chinese students and are commonly recommended by Chinese students. The remaining three series of samples are coming from the daily conversations of London locals and are recommended by London locals, but rarely used by Chinese international students. Slangs in the third group are the most unfamiliar group. In the survey, interviewees told us “The originality of nyash, is from the Nigerian language Yoruba, and we adopted it and used it here. People always say “she’s got nyash/bunda.” It’s a kind of compliment. Compared with nyash, “muppet(s)” is often used by white people among English people (English people here means that more than just the nationality is British, such as being born in the UK, but not of this race). It’s funny and rude, just like they often say somebody is silly or stupid, and people shouldn’t be mad at it. There are five different words that London people use in daily life to express different kinds of stab, and they are increasing over time while English adopted more words from other usages, for example, “shank” is normally used when you are trying to kill someone using a knife or a sword. “Poke” is used to replace “stab” in some of the sentences like “I will poke you with a stick.”

Table 2. The three groups of London slang samples

Group	Samples of slang	Familiarity 1-5 (Unfamiliar to familiar)
The initial group	Mate (peer)	3.86
	Innit	3.22
The second group	Clapped (very ugly)	2.25
	Buss me (pass me)	2.67
	On my ones (to be by oneself)	2.8
	Wet (cringe and weird/embarrassing)	2.75
The third group	Muppets (you clowns/you idiots)	2.1
	Cheff/shank/wet/poke/dag (to stab)	1.98
	Nyash/bunda (big bum)	1.84
Average Score		2.61

According to Kerswill, mate and innit are two slang words that are widely known in the UK, especially among the young, meaning that studying in the UK have access to them. Hence, the first group includes these two slangs^[19]. Innit means “isn’t it,” a British slang that was widely known and has been popular among young people in certain areas of the UK since the 1970s, followed by a long period of changes in which the use of innit grew. In later years, innit ceased to be a feature of a particular group and its status in slang has established that is now used by people of all classes^[20].

“Mate” is used in a variety of contexts and has many different interpretations depending on the situation^[8]. “Mate” in British context, is categorized as a nickname. Typically, the slang term “mate” is used to refer to male pals, although it is also used to refer to female friends^[21]. Working-class boys in London led the use of “mate” and “men” to address others, and they function as pragmatic markers. When working-class London girls discussed other people’s affairs, especially other girls, they also used this kind of address^[19]. Similarly, in this research,

Interviewer A stated “Learning British slang does not affect my social life. Maybe I am surrounded by the upper class and everyone is civilized, but I can understand when people say slang.” Middle and upper-class Chinese young people, especially those who have studied at high-ranking junior and senior high schools in the UK, they have been taught to use the language from an international perspective since they were young and have developed a mindset towards the use of slang. After surveying for 8 years, New Oriental found that many highly educated families support their children to study abroad, with a bachelor’s degree or above accounting for more than 50% and 13.4% of parents who have studied abroad support their children to study abroad, which means that they have better economic conditions from the beginning ^[22].

When asked about whether young people use slang just because they think it is cool, Interviewer A explained that “slang is generally used by uneducated people, and the upper class knows better words. I don’t think young people will learn slang because it’s cool. Maybe some people will learn it to fit in with punks, or maybe your classmates talk like that, and some rap music you’ll be exposed to.” Almost all the young people around him use slang in their daily lives, but their parents seldom use it. Additionally, some old people use slang in purpose to fit in with the young people in England.

The second feature is that the familiarity of Chinese students with slang is affected by the time they spend in the UK. **Table 3** shows the familiarity of the same slang among Chinese students with different lengths of stay in the UK. From the data, it can be found that the familiarity with slang of the interviewed Chinese students tends to increase according to the length of study in the UK. These students have studied in the UK for different lengths of time and their familiarity with different slang is still influenced by the spread of the slang itself in **Table 2** as mentioned perviously.

Table 3. Comparison of dwell time and familiarity

Samples of slang	Stay in England (over five years)	Stay in England (three to five years)
Mate (peer)	4.86	4
Innit	4.64	3
Clapped (very ugly)	2.93	2.2
Buss me (pass me)	4.07	2.7
On my ones (to be by oneself)	4	2.9
Wet (cringe and weird/embarrassing)	4.14	2.3
Muppets (you clowns/you idiots)	2.86	2.3
Cheff/shank/wet/poke/dag (to stab)	2.5	2.3
Nyash/bunda (big bum)	2.14	2.3
Average score	3.57	2.69

Note: Familiarity 1 to 5 (Unfamiliar to familiar)

The third feature is that Chinese students learn London slang mainly through offline learning from local friends and online social media. According to the survey, 70.59% of Chinese students expressed they had met London slang in their daily lives. In addition to using social media, most Chinese students often learn about London slang from local friends in London. In one-to-one interviews, three respondents mentioned that the first they got to know London slang was through communication with local people. For instance, Interviewee A said, “My first exposure to London slang was playing in the yard with my neighbor’s children when I was a child.” As well as local people in London, London people in China are also spreading London slang, such as the

experience of Interviewee C who says “My science teacher was from London and he said slang every day, so was my English teacher and he would tell us some fun London slangs when we were chatting after class.”

Table 4. The methods respondents used to learn slang

Methods	Percentage
Learn from a local friend	60.78%
Chinese students in UK	27.45%
Teachers and schools in the UK	11.76%
Social media platforms	62.75%
Video sites	49.02%

Additionally, a small number of Chinese students learn about London slang through their Chinese friends. Interviewer D said that he spends most of the time with Chinese students, “There is nothing I need to say about slang in my daily life. It is indeed bilingual when I talk to friends, but it is just some common, some ordinary, long-used words.”

Most Chinese students thought they hadn’t learned about slang through their schools and teachers in the UK. In response to this finding, the researcher inserted a relevant question in the one-to-one interviews, “Does learning London slang affect your academic writing or presentation?” Interviewee A states “Teachers have not recommended slang to students since secondary school, especially in public schools. I’ve used slang in academic writing before, but I’m not likely to make the mistake again. I was corrected by my English teacher at the time and I’ve been careful about using it since! Unless you want to act humor, but not my style.” By contrast, Interviewee B declared, “Using slang in academic writing is not very useful, but presentation can sometimes be. However, you have to consider the possibility that the audience who are listening to your presentation may not understand your slang.”

It revealed that most teachers prefer to use formal language to teach students and teach academic writing and presentation skills on formal occasions. It means that slang is not taught by teachers formally and needs to be acquired in society, such as by neighbors, local friends, and social media.

5.3. Chinese students have a clear selection preference when it comes to using Internet media to study UK slang

Table 5. The methods respondents used to learn slang

Social media platforms	Percentage
Instagram	84.31%
WhatsApp	52.94%
Twitter	23.53%
Snap chat	31.37%
Facebook	5.88%
Other	17.65%

The data in **Table 4** shows that 62.75% of Chinese students learn slang through social media platforms, so in **Table 5** we have selected current popular social media platforms, which include Instagram (1.386 billion

users), Facebook (2.85 billion users), YouTube (2.29 billion users) and WhatsApp (1.6 billion users), which is ranked as the fourth most popular social network. Manovich mentioned that in the five years from 2013 to 2017, Instagram grew by 630 million monthly active users [23]. According to the latest announcement from Facebook, Instagram’s parent company, Instagram is now known to have 1 billion monthly active users (MAU) and 500 million daily active users (DAU). WhatsApp, a completely different style from Instagram, is also chosen by more than half of Chinese students in our survey. Interviewee A, in response to a question about the specific social media platform he encounters with slang most, “There is also Snapchat, but I refuse to use it because it sucks, bad interface design, limited functionality.”

Surprisingly, only a few people chose Twitter, and only three people chose Facebook. For the situation why Chinese students do not use Facebook and Twitter, Interviewee A claimed that “Facebook is outdated and Twitter is very outdated, proprietary, and lack of freedom.” Interviewee C said “I don’t use Facebook. I’m probably more used to using Instagram and Twitter. Twitter is mainly used to see the pictures drawn about anime, Instagram is convenient, then there are more people of the same age using it, I feel that Facebook is more for middle-aged people.” Interviewee D mentioned, “Facebook is out, Twitter is not good, I mainly read news that I can’t find elsewhere.” Aside from some mainstream media in Western countries, nine people offered other ways to learn slang, including the popular Chinese social media apps WeChat, Xiaohongshu, and Zhihu.

Table 6. Preference of video types

Video types	Percentage
Television (TV) series	39.22%
Movies	15.69%
Short videos	78.43%
Talk show	54.9%
Other	11.76%

The data in **Table 4** shows that 49.02% of Chinese students learn slang through video sites. The data in **Table 6** further analyses the types of videos Chinese students watch through. Of these, 78.43% of the respondents believe that they usually learn slang by brushing up on videos (cited by the amount of time spent on videos).

5.4. The detailed use of slang can promote the language localization of Chinese students in the UK

Table 7. The extent to which the use of British slang affects Chinese students

Impact extent	Percentage
No impact	0%
Weak impact	17.65%
Moderate impact	35.29%
Strong impact	25.49%
Significant impact	21.57%

Table 7 shows Chinese students’ evaluation of whether learning to use slang helped them integrate into

the local culture. Most of the respondents thought that learning to use slang had a moderate or greater effect on their integration into the local culture, and no respondents thought that learning to use slang did not affect their integration into the local culture. Only nine respondents thought that learning to use slang had little effect on their integration into the local culture, and they said that they had never learned slang to integrate into the local culture, so it is easy to see that the extent of the effect is influenced by the respondents' own subjective awareness and social habits.

Table 8. Chinese students' evaluation of their localization

Degree of localization	Percentage
Low	17.65%
Poor	13.73%
Moderate	39.22%
Good	27.45%
High	1.96%

According to **Table 8**, nine respondents said they felt they had a low level of localization, five of them had lived in London for less than a year and seven of them said they had never encountered any British slang before. For the nine slang words on the questionnaire, their familiarity level was almost all around 1.2, and they had all been exposed to British slang exclusively on the internet. They hardly used slang in real life and had never learned it to fit in with the native British culture. Fifteen respondents said they felt they had a high or good level of localization, eight of them had lived in the UK for more than five years, 13 thought they had encountered British slang in their day-to-day life, and their familiarity with “mate” and “innit” was almost close to 5. Also, they had come across British slang through British friends, and nearly half of them had deliberately tried to learn British slang.

Globalization has come a long way in the world, and the problem of foreigners localizing in foreign languages is becoming more serious. Preece examines the linguistic diversity of minority undergraduates at a new London university, there is an exploration of how the students adopt bidialectal identity positions to contrast the standard English practices of the academic community with the vernacular English language (slang) practices of their peers ^[24]. The study demonstrates the impact of learning slang on students' social and multilingual identity.

6. Conclusion

This study focuses on three aspects of Chinese students in London: the characteristics of using slang, learning styles, and the impact of learning slang on Chinese students' language localization. In the process of obtaining research data, this study selected 51 Chinese international students in London and conducted a questionnaire survey to address the core issues. To obtain the core information more intuitively, four Chinese international students were interviewed about learning and using slang in the UK, and two other local students were interviewed about the relationship between slang, youth culture, and class. By summarizing the research of other scholars in the same field, together with the research results of this study, the following points are presented.

The study found that Chinese students studying English slang in the UK have four main characteristics. Initially, Chinese students are passive in learning and using London slang, even though slang is related to social

class, age, education, and ethnicity. Chinese students seldom learn London slang actively, and always discover and implicitly learn how to use slang when they are passively exposed to it. The use of slang by Chinese students is influenced by the spread of the slang itself. The degree of Chinese students' familiarity with slang is influenced by the people who use it, for example, slang that is popular among Britain people is likely to be unknown to Chinese students due to the limitations of their social circles. Additionally, Chinese students' familiarity with slang is also affected by the familiarity of the vocabulary involved in slang.

Chinese students learn British slang mainly through offline learning with local friends and online social media. Chinese students have a clear choice of preference when using internet media to learn British slang, with Instagram and WhatsApp dominating in particular, while Chinese students who use Facebook and Twitter to learn slang are few. Furthermore, learning and using slang can promote the language localization of Chinese students in the UK, and proactively reaching out and finding ways to learn slang can accelerate the language localization process of Chinese students.

This study has obtained the characteristics, ways, and roles of Chinese international students in learning and using British slang, which fills the gap of current related research, provides practical examples for Chinese international students who want to learn and use London slang, and provides a theoretical basis for scholars who want to study Chinese international students and language localization. The next stage of research should focus more on finding innovative and efficient ways to help Chinese students learn slang.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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