

Affordances and Constraints of Gen Z Slang in ELT Classrooms: Students' and Teachers' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the affordances and constraints of Gen Z slang in English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms from the perspectives of students and teachers. A transcendental phenomenological research design was employed. The participants were ten English teachers and ten Generation Z students from selected secondary schools in Infanta, Quezon, chosen through purposive sampling. Data were gathered through validated semi-structured interview guides and questionnaires and were analyzed using Colaizzi's phenomenological data analysis method. The findings revealed that Gen Z slang functioned as a linguistic bridge that supported communication, engagement, classroom rapport, confidence, psychological empowerment, identity formation, authentic expression, and learner-centered interaction. At the same time, it created constraints related to

register confusion, semantic ambiguity, vocabulary misunderstanding, academic-writing difficulty, assessment issues, communication barriers, classroom exclusion, and tension between fluency and accuracy. Teachers used strategies such as translanguaging, contextualization, explicit register instruction, controlled integration, scaffolding, corrective feedback, classroom language boundaries, and mediation between informal and formal English. The study concludes that Gen Z slang should not be completely eliminated from ELT classrooms; rather, it should be managed as a contextual pedagogical resource that helps learners communicate naturally while developing formal academic English.

Keywords: *affordances, constraints, English Language Teaching, Gen Z slang, phenomenology, teacher mediation*

INTRODUCTION

Language is dynamic because it reflects the identities, cultures, and communication practices of its users. In contemporary classrooms, one of the most visible forms of language change is the use of Generation Z slang. Terms such as rizz, bet, slay, no cap, forda, ferson, ghosting, and similar expressions have spread through social media, peer interaction, and digital communication. These expressions are now heard not only in informal spaces but also in English Language Teaching classrooms.

The use of Gen Z slang in ELT classrooms creates both opportunities and concerns. On the one hand, slang can help students express themselves more naturally, build confidence, reduce communication anxiety, and create a sense of belonging. It can make classroom interaction more relatable because it reflects the language practices of learners who are immersed in digital and youth culture. On the other hand, unregulated use of slang may blur the distinction between informal and academic registers, create semantic confusion, and affect students' ability to use formal English appropriately in writing, assessment, and academic discussion.

This issue is especially important in the Philippine context, where English remains a major medium of instruction and a key language for academic and professional development. Filipino learners are exposed to

English in school and to digital slang in online platforms, which creates a complex language environment. Teachers are therefore challenged to recognize students' language identities while still strengthening formal English proficiency, grammar, academic vocabulary, and communicative competence.

The study was anchored on Sociocultural Theory and Generational Theory. Sociocultural Theory explains that learning happens through social interaction, cultural tools, and guided participation. In this view, slang may function as a cultural and linguistic tool that mediates classroom communication. Generational Theory explains that learners and teachers may differ in communication styles because they grew up in different historical, cultural, and technological environments. These generational differences help explain why Gen Z slang may be meaningful to students but confusing or challenging for some teachers.

This study examined how English teachers and Gen Z students perceived the affordances and constraints of Gen Z slang in ELT classrooms. It specifically explored how slang influenced communication, engagement, language proficiency development, and teacher-student interaction, and identified strategies used by teachers to manage its use while maintaining formal English standards.

Literature Review

Gen Z Slang, Digital Culture, and Language Change

Gen Z slang reflects the rapid evolution of language in digitally mediated spaces. Because Generation Z learners grew up with social media, instant messaging, memes, online videos, and mobile communication, their language practices often include abbreviations, coinages, clipped forms, blended words, and context-specific expressions. Grandez et al. (2023) described the morphological structure of Generation Z slang in social media, while Vacalares et al. (2023) examined the intelligibility of internet slang between millennials and Gen Z users.

Studies suggest that slang is not merely careless language; it can function as a marker of identity, belonging, humor, creativity, and social alignment. Kostic and Burai (2023) reported that both teachers and students may recognize the value of slang in ESL classrooms, while Gonzaga and colleagues described Gen Z slang as a language form that can help students express themselves and connect with their peers.

However, the meanings of slang can change quickly and may not be understood equally by all speakers. Bukhari et al. (2025) discussed the generational language gap, while Fitri (2025) emphasized that unfamiliarity with slang may lead to misinterpretation, confusion, and social distance. These findings show that Gen Z slang must be understood as a changing linguistic phenomenon shaped by digital culture and peer interaction.

Affordances of Gen Z Slang in ELT Classrooms

Affordances refer to the opportunities or benefits that a phenomenon provides. In ELT classrooms, Gen Z slang may support engagement because it makes interaction feel more familiar and less intimidating. Rohman (2026) reported that English slang in EFL classroom interaction can reduce anxiety, support connection, and influence learning outcomes, while Herawati et al. (2025) noted that English slang from TikTok may contribute to vocabulary and communication when used with contextual awareness.

Gen Z slang can also support identity expression and authentic communication. Students may use slang to show belongingness, creativity, humor, and social identity. When teachers acknowledge this language practice, learners may feel that their experiences and voices are recognized. This can contribute to a more inclusive and learner-centered environment.

At the pedagogical level, slang may be used as a bridge to formal English. Teachers can ask students to compare slang with standard vocabulary, discuss appropriateness, identify context, and translate informal expressions into academic language. In this way, slang becomes a starting point for register awareness rather than a replacement for formal English.

Constraints of Gen Z Slang and the Need for Teacher Mediation

The use of Gen Z slang also creates constraints in formal language learning. Students may become confused between informal and academic registers, use slang in essays or formal presentations, or misunderstand spelling and vocabulary because slang often alters conventional forms. Peerzada et al. (2025) noted that learners

may struggle to avoid informal terminology in academic writing, especially when digital language habits influence classroom language.

Semantic ambiguity is another concern. A slang term may have multiple meanings depending on context, group use, or online trend. Teachers and students may not always share the same understanding of the term. This may create communication barriers, exclusion, or misunderstanding in the classroom.

Teacher mediation is therefore essential. Teachers need to guide students in knowing when slang is appropriate and when formal English is required. Strategies such as translanguaging, scaffolding, controlled integration, explicit instruction on register, role-playing, formal-informal comparison, and corrective feedback can help students shift between informal and academic language without rejecting their linguistic identity.

METHODS

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative transcendental phenomenological research design. This design was appropriate because the study sought to understand the lived experiences and perspectives of English teachers and Gen Z students regarding the use of Gen Z slang in ELT classrooms. The transcendental approach enabled the researcher to apply bracketing by setting aside personal assumptions and focusing on the participants' actual experiences.

Research Locale

The study was conducted in selected secondary schools in Infanta, Quezon. The locale was appropriate because the participating students and English teachers had direct experiences with Gen Z slang in classroom communication and English-language learning.

Participants and Sampling Technique

The participants were twenty individuals: ten English teachers and ten Gen Z students from selected schools in Infanta, Quezon. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who could provide meaningful and experience-based insights into the phenomenon. Teacher-participants were selected because of their English-language teaching experience, while student-participants were selected because they belonged to Generation Z and had direct experiences using or encountering Gen Z slang in and outside the classroom.

Table 1. *Summary of Participants*

Participant group	Number of participants	Selection basis	Contribution to the study
English teachers	10	English-language teachers with classroom experience in secondary schools	Provided instructional, assessment, and classroom-management perspectives on Gen Z slang
Gen Z students	10	Students born within the Generation Z cohort and exposed to slang use in school and digital spaces	Provided learner perspectives on communication, engagement, identity, and language learning
Total	20	Purposively selected participants	Represented both teacher and student viewpoints

Research Instrument

The primary instrument was a semi-structured interview guide. Separate sets of guide questions were prepared for teachers and students. The questions focused on the perceived benefits of Gen Z slang, the difficulties encountered in its use or interpretation, its influence on language proficiency, classroom engagement, and communication, and the strategies teachers used to manage slang in ELT classrooms. The instruments were reviewed by experts for content validity, clarity, and appropriateness. A dry run was also conducted to improve the phrasing and flow of questions.

Data Gathering Procedure

Before data collection, a formal letter of authorization was secured from the school administration. After permission was granted, the researcher scheduled interviews with the participants. The interviews were conducted either in person or virtually, depending on participants' availability and preference. The researcher clarified questions when necessary but avoided influencing responses. The participants' responses were recorded, transcribed, organized, and prepared for qualitative analysis.

Data Analysis

The study used Colaizzi's phenomenological method of data analysis. The researcher read and reread the transcripts, identified significant statements, formulated meanings, clustered these meanings into themes, developed exhaustive descriptions, produced a clear summary of the findings, and returned to participants for confirmation of the interpretations. The source manuscript included a figure on page 35 illustrating Colaizzi's seven steps of phenomenological analysis, which visually presented the systematic movement from repeated transcript reading to theme development and validation.

Ethical Consideration

The study observed voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and respect for participants' rights. Participants were informed of the purpose and procedures of the study and were allowed to withdraw at any time without consequences. Pseudonyms or codes were used in reporting the findings, and identifying details were not disclosed. Since student-participants were involved, the final submission should confirm the documented parental or guardian consent and learner assent procedures and provide the institutional ethics-review reference number when available.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Affordances of Gen Z Slang in ELT Classrooms

The participants perceived Gen Z slang as a meaningful classroom resource when used appropriately. The student-participants described slang as part of everyday communication, peer interaction, and online expression. Teachers also recognized that slang could support classroom rapport and help students express ideas more naturally. Four affordance-related themes emerged: pervasive use of Gen Z slang, psychological empowerment, Gen Z slang as a linguistic and pedagogical resource, and identity formation and authentic expression.

Table 2. *Affordances of Gen Z Slang in ELT Classrooms*

Major theme	Theme clusters	Synthesis of findings
Pervasive use of Gen Z slang	Influence of social circles; habitual usage; online expression	Students used slang frequently in peer, family, and digital interactions, making it a normal part of their communication practices.
Psychological empowerment	Increased confidence; reduced communication anxiety; belongingness	Slang helped students feel less embarrassed, more confident, and more willing to participate because it reflected familiar language.
Linguistic and pedagogical resource	Enhanced engagement; supportive classroom environment; teacher-student rapport	Slang made lessons more relatable, enjoyable, and interactive when used as a bridge to learning.
Identity formation and authentic expression	Creativity; student voice; social identity; authentic communication	Slang allowed learners to express personality, creativity, and group identity while building connection with classmates and teachers.

These findings support the view that slang can function as a cultural and linguistic resource. In classroom interaction, it may lower affective barriers and help students feel that their language practices are acknowledged. However, the value of slang depends on teacher guidance and contextual use.

Constraints of Gen Z Slang in Formal English Learning

The study also revealed several constraints. Teachers were particularly concerned that repeated or unregulated slang use could interfere with formal writing, grammatical accuracy, spelling, and academic register. Students also recognized that some slang words could be confusing because meanings change or differ across groups.

Table 3. *Constraints of Gen Z Slang in ELT Classrooms*

Major theme	Theme clusters	Synthesis of findings
Linguistic interference and register confusion	Breakdown of language boundaries; academic-writing difficulty; spelling confusion	Students sometimes struggled to distinguish informal slang from formal English, especially in writing, presentations, and academic tasks.
Semantic ambiguity and vocabulary confusion	Multiple meanings; changing meanings; abbreviation misunderstanding	Some slang terms had unstable or context-dependent meanings, which created misunderstanding among students and teachers.
Assessment and academic performance constraints	Rubric difficulty; formal output concerns; accuracy problems	Teachers found it challenging when slang appeared in formal outputs because academic standards required standard English.
Communication barriers and classroom exclusion	Teacher-student gap; peer exclusion; clarification needs	Not all teachers or students understood the same slang terms, which sometimes created confusion, exclusion, or disruption in classroom communication.

The constraints show that Gen Z slang becomes problematic when learners are not guided in register awareness. The issue is not merely the presence of slang but the lack of clear boundaries between informal communication and formal academic English.

Effects of Gen Z Slang on Communication, Engagement, and Language Development

The effects of Gen Z slang were described as both facilitative and constraining. It helped learners participate, speak more naturally, and relate to classroom topics, but it also created tension between fluency and accuracy. This confirms the participants' view that Gen Z slang is a double-edged linguistic phenomenon.

Table 4. *Effects of Gen Z Slang on Language Learning*

Effect area	Positive effect	Possible risk	Interpretation
Communication	Supports quick, familiar, and expressive interaction	May cause misunderstanding when meanings are not shared	Slang can improve classroom communication when all participants understand the context.
Engagement	Makes lessons relatable, fun, and student-centered	May distract from academic focus if overused	Slang can increase participation when integrated with clear instructional purpose.
Fluency	Encourages students to speak naturally and confidently	May weaken attention to formal accuracy	Teachers need to connect fluency development with grammar and academic vocabulary.
Identity expression	Allows students to express belongingness and authenticity	May exclude those unfamiliar with slang	Slang can validate student identity but must be inclusive and moderated.

The results indicate that Gen Z slang can enhance classroom interaction when it is treated as a starting point for learning. It becomes a constraint when it replaces formal English or when it prevents students from adapting language to audience, purpose, and context.

Teacher Strategies for Managing Gen Z Slang

Teachers served as language mediators. Rather than completely rejecting slang, many used strategies that allowed limited and purposeful integration while maintaining formal English standards. These strategies emphasized context, appropriateness, and movement from informal to formal language.

Table 5. *Teacher Strategies in Navigating Gen Z Slang*

Strategy	Description	Pedagogical purpose
Teacher flexibility and relatability	Teachers sometimes joined students' humor, stayed updated, and allowed slang in casual exchanges.	Builds rapport and reduces distance between teachers and learners.
Classroom language control	Teachers reminded students to use formal English in discussions, writing, exams, and academic tasks.	Maintains academic standards and prevents overreliance on slang.
Scaffolded language integration	Teachers used slang as a bridge before shifting to standard vocabulary or formal sentence construction.	Supports confidence while developing formal English competence.
Explicit register instruction	Teachers contrasted slang with academic language through charts, examples, role-playing, and sentence comparison.	Develops awareness of appropriateness and audience.
Contextualization over elimination	Teachers reframed slang as a resource that can be used in proper contexts rather than banned entirely.	Balances learner identity with academic language development.

The strategies show that effective ELT practice does not require a strict rejection of students' linguistic realities. Instead, teachers can use Gen Z slang to teach language awareness, register switching, and responsible communication.

Integrated Pedagogical Implication

The integrated findings point to the need for a balanced classroom language approach. Gen Z slang can be used in warm-up activities, motivational tasks, informal sharing, vocabulary comparison, and contextual discussions. However, formal English should remain the standard for essays, examinations, presentations, academic writing, and formal assessment. Teachers should clearly explain when slang is acceptable, when it is inappropriate, and how students can translate informal language into academic English.

Table 6. *Proposed Classroom Language Management Guide*

Classroom context	Recommended use of slang	Teacher guidance
Warm-up and motivation	Allow limited and purposeful slang to activate interest	Use slang to connect with students, then link it to lesson objectives.
Vocabulary development	Use slang as a comparison point	Ask students to identify formal equivalents, meanings, and appropriate contexts.
Group work and informal discussion	Allow moderate use when it supports interaction	Ensure all members understand the terms and no one is excluded.
Academic writing and formal speaking	Restrict slang unless analyzed as a topic	Require formal vocabulary, grammar, and register.
Assessment	Use standard English as the required language	Include criteria for appropriateness, clarity, and formal register.
Teacher-student interaction	Use slang sparingly for rapport	Model respectful and context-sensitive language switching.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that Gen Z slang functions both as an affordance and a constraint in ELT classrooms. As an affordance, it supports confidence, engagement, psychological empowerment, classroom rapport, authentic expression, fluency, creativity, and identity formation. It helps students participate more naturally and allows teachers to connect classroom instruction with learners' actual communication practices.

As a constraint, Gen Z slang may interfere with formal English learning when students fail to distinguish between informal and academic registers. It may cause semantic ambiguity, vocabulary confusion, spelling problems, assessment difficulties, communication barriers, and inclusion gaps. These challenges show that slang should not be used without guidance, especially in formal academic tasks.

Teachers play a crucial mediating role in balancing student expression and academic language standards. The goal is not to eliminate Gen Z slang but to help students use it responsibly, contextually, and appropriately. Through scaffolding, translanguaging, register instruction, controlled integration, and explicit classroom language boundaries, Gen Z slang can become a pedagogical resource that supports communicative fluency while strengthening formal English proficiency.

Recommendation

English teachers may use Gen Z slang in selected classroom activities to make discussions more relatable and engaging, but they should establish clear boundaries for formal writing, oral presentations, examinations, and academic outputs. Teachers should provide regular practice in switching between informal and formal English so that learners develop register awareness and language appropriateness. Slang may be integrated in warm-up activities, vocabulary lessons, role-playing, translation exercises, and formal-informal sentence comparisons.

Students should be guided to understand when slang is useful and when standard English is required. They should avoid overdependence on informal expressions and continue practicing correct grammar, academic vocabulary, spelling, and formal communication. School administrators and curriculum planners may support teachers through professional development on digital language trends, generational communication, translanguaging, and culturally responsive English teaching.

Future researchers may examine the long-term effects of Gen Z slang on English proficiency, academic writing, oral communication, and assessment outcomes. Studies may also include more participants, other grade levels, different regions, and additional perspectives from parents, curriculum developers, and school leaders. Quantitative or mixed-method studies may further test how slang exposure relates to formal English performance over time.

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