Investigating university students' colloquial speech utterances of English in intercultural settings: a case study in Albanian context

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Abstract

　　　In today's world, the widespread use of English, along with student mobility, democratisation, cultural diversity, and the influence of media—especially the Internet—shapes the language environments of higher education institutions from a broad cultural and international communication perspective. This situation is also evident at the University "Ismail Qemali" in Vlore, Albania. The author of this paper researched how English is utilized by both local and foreign students outside the classroom. To gather data, informal conversations were recorded and systematically analyzed using descriptive approaches, statistical modeling, and conversation analysis methods, involving a corpus of 60 students from different native backgrounds (47 local Albanian students and 13 European students). Qualitative and quantitative data were collected to identify phonetic patterns, their occurrences in colloquial speech, and the reasons behind certain linguistic usages or deviations observed in students' "small talk" in multicultural settings. Some participants noted that they are influenced by English and American cultures and lifestyles to varying degrees. Conversely, other students communicated in their native languages while applying basic speech acts that were typical of their original cultural backgrounds. This behaviour illustrated some inconsistencies in phonetics, grammar, and vocabulary. These linguistic deviations reflect how language embodies individual personalities and cultural backgrounds, as speakers adapt their styles and settings in conversation.

Keywords: Spoken English, intercultural classroom, conversation analysis, students' discourse, phonetic-lexical-grammatical patterns

Introduction

Over the past 20 years, youth language has become a focus of study in Historical Sociolinguistics (Vijayan, J.C., 2016). By "colloquial speech," we refer to utterances that occur during interactions and are characterized by everyday usage rather than being tied to a specific language register. The cultural and linguistic diversity among youth has grown due to migration and the mobility programs for university students.

This study focuses on the use of youth-oriented English in intercultural contexts within higher education. It draws from both linguistic disciplines, including variational linguistics, sociolinguistics, lexicology, and pragmatics, as well as non-linguistic fields such as sociology, psychology, and cultural studies to identify internal and external factors influencing the speech of university students, with their primary linguistic characteristics including strong spontaneity, significant key points, and broad generalizations.. For this purpose, the study includes recorded conversations from the University "Ismail Qemali" in Vlore during the academic year 2023/2024. This term provided numerous opportunities to observe, research, and deepen our knowledge of Spoken English and Conversation Analysis.

To maintain the individuality and openness of group and personal communication, university students show a strong desire for a personalized language style that emphasizes the natural and relatable aspects of conversation. Much of the content in their communication is closely related to their interests and serves as a means for university students to express negative emotions and relieve internal pressure.

A person's native speech, immediate context, and paralinguistic factors have a significant impact on their everyday communication in English. Additionally, dialectal varieties can be found in various aspects of language, including syllables, intonation patterns, and sentence structures. These elements contribute to language variation, which is a crucial aspect of how language is used.

Literature review

University students' speech patterns have attracted interest in linguistic research due to the intricate relationship between language, identity, and social interaction. Students often utilize colloquial language—casual and frequently specific to context—as an essential tool for navigating social connections and expressing their identity within academic settings.

Colloquial language is often prevalent in academic settings. Students frequently use informal speech patterns to establish group identity and to build and strengthen friendships (Yan, 2024). Using colloquial speech or slang can help speakers appear more relaxed, confident, and engaged with their peers. Factors such as one's native language, immediate context, and paralinguistic elements significantly influence students' everyday communication in English (Fauziah & Syamsul, 2021). Colloquial language and spoken communication significantly influence learners' linguistic and cognitive development, particularly in the context of second language acquisition (Gochitashvili & Shabashvili, 2021). Since colloquial speech is informal, children are more likely to engage with their classmates naturally, fostering a more relaxed and approachable style of communication (Iqbal et al., 2021).

Students' attitudes toward spoken forms of language can significantly influence their linguistic choices. Dialectal varieties are evident in aspects of language such as syllables, intonation patterns, and sentence structures, which are important for understanding language variation. These attitudes reflect a shift in language perception and underscore the significance of colloquial language as a means of cultural expression among students (Hashanah, 2020). There are differing opinions regarding the use of spoken English (Mujaj, 2011). Some scholars believe that the standard of English is at risk. Additionally, valuable insights can be gained by examining the spoken English usage of university students in multicultural campus settings. However, it has been challenging to demonstrate the growth of spoken English, as studies have primarily relied on 'silent documentation'—such as diaries and brief personal notes—which are the only original materials available for research. Since the introduction of new media, particularly social networks like Instagram and TikTok, young people have increasingly expressed themselves verbally in everyday communication using linguistic patterns found on these platforms (Auzanneau & Juilliard, 2012). Informants have adopted colloquial language from online media and integrated it into their daily conversations with friends in their local environments (Fauziah & Syamsul, 2021). Both virtual and non-virtual settings provide university students with opportunities to reflect on their sociocultural status and identity (Neuland, 2008).

In conclusion, the use of spoken English by university students is a complex phenomenon that involves elements of social interaction, and identity. Colloquial forms are widely used in everyday communication and are seen positively. Therefore, it is important to have a sophisticated understanding of how these utterances function in academic settings. The importance of colloquial language as a valid and beneficial part of linguistic diversity in higher education must be acknowledged as research advances, regarding the lexical and phonological characteristics, and deviations of

English by both native and non-native university students at the University "Ismail Qemali", Vlore, Albania. It is also important to explore the reasons behind certain linguistic usages and deviations.

Methodology
Research Design

This study aims to analyze how language is used outside the classroom and to identify the variables and sociocultural factors that may influence students' conversational language use.This study aims to analyze how language is used outside the classroom and to identify the variables and sociocultural factors that may influence students' conversational language use.

The research questions of this study are:
- What are the lexical and phonological characteristics, as well as the deviations in spoken language, of native and foreign university students at the University "Ismail Qemali" in Vlore, Albania?
- What are the reasons behind specific linguistic usages or deviations?

Participants

A total of 60 students participated in the research, all of whom were enrolled in various degree programs at the Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Humanities, University "Ismail Qemali" in Vlore, Albania. The participants included 47 native Albanian students and 13 European students on the Erasmus mobility scheme. Among them, there were 33 boys and 27 girls, all aged between 18 and 22 years old.

Data Collection Process

To conduct the conversation analysis, a collection of natural spoken interactions between young native students and Erasmus exchange students using English for communication on campus was gathered and transcribed. A non-intrusive audio recorder was used to collect the audio data. The conversations took place on university campuses, including in classrooms, but not during lectures or seminars. Each recording lasted between 10 and 20 minutes, with English as the primary language of communication. The audio quality is excellent, with voices being captured clearly and distinctly. The recordings span three months, corresponding to a semester of the academic year.

Data Analysis Methods

The research methods employed in the study include:

1. A descriptive approach that incorporates both qualitative and quantitative techniques, as well as 2- conversation analysis (Sacks, Schegloff, Jefferson, 1960).
2. A statistical model was utilized to identify the frequency of specific words or phonetic patterns in the collected data. The reason for this approach is that linguistic and sociolinguistic connections cannot be fully understood by examining language in conventional ways.

Interpreting and Reporting the Results

Conversation analysis and a descriptive approach align with the study's aims and objectives. The data analysis process systematically progressed through the interpretation of speech acts, vocabulary, and structural patterns.

Privacy Code of Ethics

From the planning stage to the analysis and processing of data, we prioritized the privacy of all participants in our study and took measures to prevent unauthorized disclosure of their information. As a result, we only shared two details about the research subjects: their gender and their branch of study. By focusing on ethics, privacy, and care while adhering to legal, regulatory, and compliance requirements, we ensured that personally identifiable information remained confidential. Additionally, all participants provided verbal consent and voluntarily chose to take part in the study.

Results
Lexical peculiarities
Backchannels

Colloquial language is often present in casual conversations among university students. In this context, general English backchannels are frequently used by students to engage their listeners and receive feedback. Some examples of these backchannels include: *"Oh God!", "Yeah", "Right", "Fine", "OK", "Alright", "I see", "Huh?", "Uh", "Erm", "Um", "Well", "So", "Like", and "Hmm"*. In terms of usage, both boys and girls employed similar amounts of backchannels in their conversations, with boys using backchannels 86% of the time and girls 82%.

The presence of the Albanian language in English conversations was notable among participants of mixed nationalities. Albanian speakers interspersed various native expressions within their English dialogue, using phrases such as *"Tamam" (meaning "right"), "E kuptoj" (meaning "I see"), and "Thua?" (meaning "really?")*. This resulted in code-mixed interactions. It is important to mention that such usage was not dominant in these conversations; these expressions were typically employed when the Albanian speakers were thinking in their native language during their English discourse.

Borrowings

One highly effective method for enhancing vocabulary is the practice of borrowing words from other languages, a phenomenon that widely occurs in contemporary communication. In this regard, it is noteworthy that a significant portion of loanwords in many languages can be traced back to English, as observed by Fagyal in 2004. This trend has been particularly pronounced within Albanian-speaking communities, where the interplay between Albanian and English has led to fascinating linguistic phenomena such as code-mixing and code-switching.

Code-mixing refers to the blending of languages within a single utterance or sentence, while code-switching involves shifting from one language to another in conversations. This kind of linguistic behavior is especially prevalent in mixed-language groups comprising both Albanian and English speakers. Among local university students, for instance, there is a noticeable inclination to incorporate English vocabulary and phrases seamlessly into their Albanian speech. They often adapt these borrowed terms, restructuring and arranging them according to the grammatical rules and conventions of English, which adds another layer of complexity to their language use.

Among the broad array of borrowed terms frequently utilized in Albanian conversations are words like "vacation," which refers to a holiday or break from routine; "babysitter," denoting someone who takes care of children; and "relax," used to convey the act of unwinding or easing tension. Other examples include "brilliant," often employed to describe something outstanding or excellent; "out," indicating various social contexts; "cardinal," referring to fundamental or primary aspects; and "trendy," associated with current fashion or styles. Additionally, everyday terms such as "make-up," "shopping," "hobby," "Facebook," "chips," and "sandwich" have also found their way into regular use among Albanian speakers, enriching their vocabulary and facilitating a more dynamic mode of communication.

A similar trend was observed among the non-native students participating in the study, revealing a tendency to incorporate specific Albanian vocabulary during face-to-face interactions. This behavior was evident not only in their conversations with one another but also in their exchanges with local Albanians, underscoring their growing integration into the vibrant cultural tapestry of the region.

The students frequently employed terms such as "faleminderit" (thank you), which expressed their gratitude and appreciation, while "pacim" (bye) and "tung" (hi) facilitated friendly farewells and greetings. Their use of "perqaputhje" (hug-kiss) demonstrated an embrace of local customs, fostering warmth and familiarity in their interactions. Phrases like "toke ketu" (give me five) and "hajde" (come on) revealed their playful engagement with the

culture, inviting camaraderie and connection. Additionally, "ckemi" (hi) was a common way to initiate conversations, further illustrating their efforts to weave themselves into the local social fabric.

These linguistic choices reflect not just a desire to communicate but a genuine commitment to establishing meaningful relationships within the multicultural environment that surrounds them. Their incorporation of Albanian terms symbolizes their eagerness to bridge cultural gaps and connect on a deeper level with the diverse community they are now a part of.

Inappropriate language

In this context, "inappropriate language" refers to words or phrases used to offend others, including name-calling, coarse and vulgar expressions, profanity, as well as discriminatory and sexually explicit language that may be considered socially or culturally offensive or harassing (Shkurtaj, 2003).

The use of vulgar language has become increasingly common, highlighting how linguistic anomalies, such as "dirty words," can help establish hierarchies within groups (Klosi, 2014). According to the study, both boys and girls used inappropriate language frequently, with 91% of boys and 86% of girls reporting such usage.

The Results section provides some insights into the reasons behind the high prevalence of inappropriate language. However, due to the severe nature of these expressions, specific examples are not suitable for inclusion in this article.

Phonetic elements

The identified phonetic elements have been categorized into two sections: general phonetic observations and specific examples of phonetic deviations.

General phonetic observations:
- Sounds that are either not pronounced clearly or not pronounced at all.
- Words and phrases that have been shortened, Eng.: "*y'all*" or *"gonna" or "wanna"*.
- Academic course names are spoken in their abbreviated form, such as Intro to Lings for Introduction to Linguistics.
- The abbreviated forms of almost all students' full names are used in their short forms.
- Glottal /h/ is not present.
- Shortening of words and as a result the omission of some sounds in the spoken form: *a lot of: [əˈlaɾə], a lotta, kind of: [ˈkaɪɾ̃ə], kinda, ut of: [ˈaʊɾə], outta*.sort of: [ˈsɔɹɾə], *sorta*.

Specific examples of phonetic deviations

Unstressed /i / is frequently used in diphthongs as j, as in [*idjot*] instead of [idiot].

A word can have many stresses, such as [*k'afe*] and [*kaf'e*], or in English such as [*CON-flict*] and [*con-FLICT*].

The phonetic factor in the pronunciation of borrowings, especially anglicisms, in the Albanian language, has the following characteristics: The pronunciation of the diphthong /ei/ in /ai/ as in the word Eng. *spray*- /sprei/, Alb.- sprai; ang. *Event*- /i'vent/, Albanian.- event, this word has undergone two changes:

> i. 1. The English front closed vowel /i/, in Albanian it turns into the middle front vowel /e/, and
>
> i. 2. In the English word, the accent falls on the second syllable, while in Albanian, the stress falls on the first syllable. The English word select /si-lekt/ becomes selectoj-oj, the middle vowel /i/ becomes the front middle vowel /e/, and the number of allophones grows with the addition of the semi-closed vowel /o/ and the palatal /j/. Words undergo the same changes: *select - selekt-oj, launch - lanc-oj, start - start-oj, test-oj, klik-oj,* etc.

Discussion

In line with the research questions of this study—specifically, what are the lexical and phonological characteristics, as well as the deviations in spoken language encountered among native and foreign university students at the University "Ismail Qemali" in Vlore, Albania? Additionally, what are the reasons behind certain linguistic usages or deviations?—this research has identified various lexical and grammatical features in the everyday speech of students. These findings are significant for understanding how university students use English in their day-to-day communication, especially in a context where English is not their native language.

This study is the first of its kind in the context of Albanian linguistic research papers on this topic. The colloquial speech of university students has been thoroughly analyzed by Albanologist Shkurtaj (2004). His research focused solely on the Albanian language and Albanian speakers, briefly mentioning the use of English as a foreign language and providing examples of how English words were incorporated by Albanian speakers.

The present research, conducted two decades after Prof. Dr. Shkurtaj's work, provides an overview of English usage among both native and non-native speakers within the Albanian context. It also examines how English integrates its pronunciation and grammar to fit into the Albanian language.

Additionally, this paper, titled "Investigating University Students' Colloquial Speech Utterances of English in Intercultural Settings: A Case

Study in the Albanian Context," presents unique insights into the Albanian language—one of the oldest languages in the world and notable for its isolation within the Indo-European language family. This research offers a glimpse into one of Europe's oldest cultures, highlighting the diversity represented by the Albanian language among the world's languages.

Furthermore, this study aims to enhance the existing body of knowledge on this topic by demonstrating how an ancient and unique language like Albanian adapts and integrates foreign linguistic borrowings, such as English, into its communication system.

The importance of this study is underscored by the framework of globalization, wherein languages influence one another. Albanian, in this context, both receives and gives, enriching itself and other languages. As discussed in section 1.2, titled "Borrowings," the non-native students who participated in the study exhibited the use of certain Albanian words during face-to-face communication with each other and with native Albanian speakers.

Analysis of Colloquial Speech Patterns.

The study participants are students at the University of Vlora, 47 natives from Albania's southern region, and 13 Erasmus exchange students from various European countries who are non-native English speakers. This choice was made because the university campus creates a diverse linguistic environment where each individual expresses their identity through the common use of English.

Common Lexical Choices include:
- The use of backchannels and phonological features in English and Albanian.
- A tendency to borrow from other languages.
- A focus on inappropriate language and vulgar words, along with a reduction in the use of standard English vocabulary.
- A loss of linguistic norms leading to what is perceived as linguistic decadence.
- An extraordinary level of lexical creativity, which will be the subject of a separate research paper.

In spontaneous speech, generic backchannels play a significant role. During conversations, speakers often interrupt the ongoing dialogue with various phrases to provide additional information and show their reactions to what has been said. Phrases such as "*Fine,*" "*OK,*" "*Alright," "Mos more!" (which translates to "No way!"* in English*), "C'thua?" (meaning "What are you saying?"),* and *"Ua!"* are commonly used.

In students' casual conversations, there is also frequent use of unnecessary borrowings, including expressions like *"OK,"* *"like a boss,"* *"new entry,"* *"nonstop,"* and *"bye-bye."* Many of these loanwords remain unchanged in Albanian, such as *"vacation,"* *"babysitter,"* *"relax,"* *"brilliant,"* *"out,"* and *"cardinal*." Some words have undergone structural changes due to the addition of endings and other characteristics of the Albanian language, for example, *"tweeting"* and *"hackers*."

English borrowings in Albanian

By analyzing linguistic data, it became evident that Albanian students often incorporate a variety of English words into their daily conversations. This integration of English vocabulary is not merely a direct insertion; rather, students skillfully adapt the pronunciation and grammatical structures of these borrowed terms to align with the characteristics of the Albanian language. The study shows that these linguistic borrowings can be systematically categorized into distinct groups, each reflecting unique patterns of usage and adaptation.

1. **Direct Borrowings**: These are words that convey the same meaning in both languages, such as *"weekend,"* *"trendy make-up,"* *"shopping,"* and *"pub."*

2. **Phonetic Borrowings**: These words have the same pronunciation in Albanian, like *"hobby,"* *"Facebook,"* *"mouse,"* and *"software."*

3. **Phonetic but Non-Synonymous Borrowings**: These words share the same pronunciation but do not have synonyms in Albanian, such as *"hot dog" and "chips."* *This category also includes terms related to fast food, like "workshops," "draft beer," "pizza," "sandwiches," and "hamburgers*."

In the Albanian context, a notable feature of certain words is their gender association. Research has shown that specific words are predominantly used by boys or girls, with statistical data reflecting the frequency of usage by each gender.

 For instance, the words most commonly used by boys include:
- Fiber (28%)
- Relax (76%)
- New entry (42%)
- Busy (84%)
- Net (91%)

On the other hand, girls tend to use more words such as:
- Please (67%)
- King (76%)
- Brilliant (31%)
- Trendy (84%)

- Baby (95%)
- G*y (26%)
- Agitator (43%)
- Vacation (29%)

The Role and Function of Offensive Language in Student Communication

Offensive language was identified in approximately 41% of the recorded conversations among students, indicating a prevalent issue within peer interactions. Both male and female students demonstrated a high frequency of using inappropriate language, with 91% of boys and 86% of girls engaging in such behaviour. This suggests that swearing, cursing, and other forms of negative verbal expressions are significant components of contemporary youth communication. The intensity and prevalence of vulgar language usage were noteworthy and, for this paper, will not be explored in further detail. Several factors have been identified as motivations behind students' use of offensive language in their interactions. Among these factors is the pursuit of social goals, where individuals may resort to inappropriate language to fit in or assert themselves within a group. This usage often serves to emphasize a point or convey strong emotions, such as anger or frustration.

Additionally, it can be a means of demonstrating power or dominance, particularly in competitive social environments.

Many of the study participants have said that their use of offensive language is influenced by their need to navigate social landscapes and overcome language barriers, particularly during their formative academic years.

For some, it serves as an outlet to relieve stress or express intense emotions in a relatable manner. Using inappropriate language can also encapsulate a sense of fun among peers, and signify a degree of informality or disrespect toward traditional forms of communication. Thus, using offensive language among students is multifaceted, intertwined with social dynamics, emotional expression, and cultural influences.

Students often use such language to bond or forge connections with others who share similar linguistic habits.

In some instances, the use of offensive language may act as a tool for creating distance from authority figures or to challenge societal expectations.

Furthermore, students may employ vulgar expressions to attract attention, provoke laughter, or engage in playful banter, all of which can be perceived as forms of humour. However, it's important to note that this kind of language can also reflect underlying verbal aggression.

Grammar Variations

A significant decrease in the complexity of morphology and morphosyntax has been observed in the speech patterns of certain university speakers. Although investigating this phenomenon was not the main aim of the study, the analysis revealed three notable grammatical features and their prevalence in casual spoken language. Here, it provides an in-depth exploration of these findings.

Adverbial usage of "one"

Firstly, the adverbial usage of "one" was identified in approximately 31% of all recorded conversations. This usage illustrates a tendency toward informal expressions, as seen in examples like, "I'm either going to have to hurry up and finish my degree or quit school and get a job." Such sentences reflect how speakers implant more informal, everyday language into their speech, which may impact their overall grammatical structure.

Usage of double modals

Secondly, the presence of certain double modals was noteworthy, appearing in around 42% of instances of small talk. A representative example is: "I might could have joined that fraternity." This construction involves merging multiple modal auxiliary verbs, generally considered nonstandard yet frequently observed in informal dialogue among peers. This tendency showcases creativity and improvisation in casual conversation, straying from traditional grammatical rules.

Usage of nonstandard verbs

Lastly, the usage of nonstandard verbs was alarmingly high, occurring nearly 78% of the time in spoken interactions. Instances such as "I'm thinking about going into town," "It's going to rain," and "I'll take you to the shopping centre" highlight the prevalence of these constructions. The reliance on nonstandard forms suggests a potential gap in grammatical awareness among speakers, who may not distinguish between standard and nonstandard usages.

These linguistic deficiencies can be traced back to quasi-standard language phenomena, as suggested by Long (1996). It appears that some university speakers may not be fully aware of the correct standard forms of expression. In their everyday spoken interactions, they firmly believe they are using standard English. However, the reality of these natural exchanges reveals a frequent incorporation of nonstandard elements, often blending features of both standard and nonstandard language. The term "quasi-standard" signifies these nonstandard elements that speakers mistakenly perceive as acceptable within standard English. This interplay significantly

affects the linguistic choices that our students make, ultimately complicating their communication.

Social and Cultural Influences on Colloquial Speech

Sociocultural implications play a crucial role in shaping students' language choices, variations in speech, and practices of intercultural communication. When we delve into the meanings of the words spoken, the contexts of various discussions, and the rich cultural backgrounds of the individuals involved, it becomes evident that speech errors can easily lead to misunderstandings, particularly among listeners who come from diverse cultures, hold different beliefs, and possess varied life experiences (Fagyal, 2004).

Take, for instance, the Albanian culture: when an individual extends an invitation to their birthday celebration, they do so with an expectation of enthusiastic acceptance and a warm, spirited response. A typical reply might be, "Ua, sa mire! Do kenaqemi!" which translates to "Wow, it's awesome! We'll have fun!" This expression is filled with excitement and conveys a strong sense of joy and anticipation.

In stark contrast, within some other European cultures, the response to a similar invitation might be much more reserved. An invitee might say, "I'll let you know if I can make it." This response can carry a tone that is neutral at best but can also be interpreted as indifferent or even negative, which is a sentiment that would be unacceptable to the Albanian way of responding. Such disparities in communicative styles underscore the potential for cultural misunderstandings.

Nevertheless, despite these sociocultural nuances leading to occasional misinterpretations, the act of communicating across linguistic and cultural frontiers has persisted. This ongoing interaction has fostered a greater tolerance for racial and cultural identities, helped cultivate acceptance of diverse viewpoints and individual personalities, and has ultimately contributed to the strengthening of bonds among people from a myriad of backgrounds. Such exchanges enrich our understanding of each other and help build a more interconnected world.

Conclusions

The analysis of linguistic data from our recordings of university students revealed several characteristics of spoken language, including subjectivity of expression, spontaneity, and concrete, direct meaning. The everyday spoken language exhibited distinct phonetic and prosodic features, which are elaborated on in the section regarding lexical peculiarities and phonetic elements.

Additionally, context plays a significant role in linguistic choices. The stylistic resources utilised in casual conversations among our university students reflect their age-based identities and cultural backgrounds. Consequently, they employed specific elements of spoken English that indicate the influence of their home languages and cultures. However, based on their proficiency in both languages, some anomalies emerged, such as contractions and weak forms, indicative of lapses in pronunciation by Albanian and Erasmus students.

Furthermore, linguistic deviations were observed in vocabulary, phonetics, intonation, stress, vowel omission, incorrect pronunciation of certain phonemes and consonants, irregular grammatical patterns, and the frequent use of colloquial language elements.

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