



Slang Lessons That Slay. No Cap.

by [A. C. Kemp](#)

English learners want to master slang for many reasons—to understand popular songs, to get the jokes in movies and television shows, and to fit in at school. But for teachers, it can be hard to know where to start and what to teach. This article aims to give you tools to plan your lessons and some activities to get you started.

How to Think About Slang

Teaching Slang Is Teaching Vocabulary

Admittedly, teaching slang has some differences from teaching “regular” vocabulary. It’s mostly low-frequency words, which makes a difference in creating word lists. It has an expiration date—some words go out style quickly—and it’s strongly tied to culture, especially popular culture. And it’s found more in informal speaking and listening than in reading and writing.

However, there are some similarities with more standard language, which doesn’t stand still either. For example, because of social changes, what are now *flight attendants* used to be *stewardesses*. Technology causes us to create new words for familiar devices, like *landline* for what we used to call *the phone*. As with slang, how and when we use the words is important: We don’t pack our ordinary conversations with high-level TOEFL words, and if we did, we might seem pretentious.

You Know More Than You Think

If you don’t keep up with the latest pop culture, you might worry that you aren’t qualified to teach slang. However, what’s slang to your students might not seem like slang to you because you use it without thinking—common slang phrasal verbs like *rip off* and *hang out* are often unfamiliar to English learners. While *slay* (perform really well) and *no cap* (no exaggeration) are relatively new, most currently used slang is not. The word *cool* has been around for more than 100 years; people still say *awesome* and *nerd*, and you can find classic slang like *drop dead gorgeous* and *play dumb* in the latest “top 40” songs.

Choosing Media, Materials, and Activities

Follow Your Students' Lead

You can make your own lists of common phrases (some examples are in the appendixes). However, I recommend you ask your students to help you. Chances are good that they are already hearing slang in conversation, on television, or in popular music. You can focus on a popular television show, movie, or song that the students request. Or, they can bring in words and phrases they have heard but don't understand or know how to use. The biggest obstacle for students is often figuring out how to spell what they hear zipping by, so recommend they watch television with the captions on, and ask them to include the sentence or context to ensure you know what they are talking about. One caveat: Have them submit their lists in written form unless you're comfortable dealing with "bad" words during class.

Don't Be Afraid of Authentic Materials

Although authentic materials may be more difficult and have fewer slang words than an exercise you created, authentic materials are the reason students want to learn slang in the first place. I recommend animated television shows and movies, which tend to include more visual cues, sound-effects, exaggerated facial expressions, and physical comedy than live-action sitcoms.

Though it's usually true that students need to know most of the words in a text or audio file to understand it, I would argue that these features of animations greatly reduce the linguistic load. On *The Simpsons*, for example, Marge's sigh and Homer's "D'oh!" require no translation. My students are able to enjoy Bart's antics and Lisa's frustrations even if they miss some of the jokes based on language, and they feel a sense of accomplishment in understanding a "real" video as opposed to an exercise designed for English as a second language students.

If Language Is Culture, Slang Is Pop Culture!

TV scripts and song lyrics that feature slang can also feature many references to culture—and especially pop culture—so be sure to put these in the word list. For instance, characters in *The Big Bang Theory* often talk about popular movies, altering the titles to make a joke. Superhero movies, such as *Deadpool*, rely on the audience's understanding of pop culture, from *The Lord of the Rings* to Facebook. Bruno Mars's hit "Uptown Funk" requires a knowledge of American peanut butter brands ("smoother than a fresh jar of Skippy"), and Taylor Swift's latest hit, "Cardigan," talks about walking the "High Line"—which sounds like a metaphor, but is actually a park in New York City.

For music in particular, the crowdsourced site [Genius](#) can help when you're not sure what's being referenced. Explanations of slang and cultural references from popular movies can be found at [Slang City](#).

Keep Listening Exercises Short

It's tempting to show your students an entire movie—and they might ask for it—but they'll get a lot more out of a 5- to 6-minute clip and a limited wordlist. Once your students are familiar with the language they'll need, write comprehension questions or create cloze exercises from an online script. If you choose a cloze exercise, focus on the list of unfamiliar words rather than randomly skipping every fifth word. Give them a chance to guess which word goes where before you play the video, and play it twice. Actors—especially in comedies—speak much more quickly than your average English teacher.

Slang Activities

Ideally, your students have conversation partners who are native speakers to try out their new vocabulary on. Even if they do have that option, you should create as many opportunities as possible for them to practice both listening and speaking in the low-stakes environment of the classroom. Here are a few ways to get started.

Start Small With Exclamations!

One simple way for students to dip their toes into the slang pool is with exclamations. These short phrases stand alone, so students don't need to use them in a sentence. After reviewing the list of words and phrases (see Appendix A), put pairs of students in groups or breakout rooms to take turns making statements and responding with exclamations. Many of these have more than one possible response.

Examples

Speaker 1: I finally got an A in biology!

Speaker 2: Way to go! (Congratulations, great job!)

Speaker 1: I finally got an A in biology!

Speaker 2: You and me both. (Me too)

Afterwards, in a whole class debrief, discuss which answers were most popular and how they were used.

Incorporate Slang Into Traditional Games

Another way to get started is through a typical icebreaker game like Find Someone Who (see Appendix B). First, introduce students to some common slang words. If the students already know each other, switch up the questions to ask about facts they are less likely to know.

Examples

- Find someone who has spent too much time **doom-scrolling** (obsessively reading about bad news online) during the pandemic.
- Find someone who has **freaked out** (gone crazy from anxiety or fear) in the last few weeks. Why did they freak out?

For online classes, create breakout rooms of two students each, and re-create the breakout rooms every 1 or 2 minutes, so that the students get to talk to as many classmates as possible.

Get Creative With Dialogues: Can I Get a _____?

In this activity borrowed from improv comedy, dialogues are inspired by suggestions. The teacher asks students questions to get a location, a relationship, and a word. It's helpful to be specific. For example:

Places

- Can I get a place you wouldn't want to go on vacation?
- Can I get a kind of restaurant?
- Can I get a place you've been angry?

Relationships

- Mother/child
- Customer/waiter
- Teacher/student

Words

- Can I get something you'd find in a hardware store?
- Can I get an animal that doesn't live in this country?
- Can I get an emotion?
- Can I get a holiday?"

The set of words is written on the board (real or virtual), and pairs of students are tasked with using them as the basis for a dialogue—which must, of course, also include words from a list of slang. If students are both advanced and adventurous, they can make up the dialogue as they go along, but most students will want to write it down before they deliver it to the class.

If you are less comfortable eliciting suggestions, you can use an improv randomizer called [Can I Get A...](#) to create them for you.

Following is an example dialogue using a basketball court (location), boss/employee (relationship), and octopus (word):

Employee: This basketball game **slaps!** Thanks so much for inviting me.

Boss: You deserve it. You really **knocked yourself out** on the coding project.

Employee: **Check out** that player! It looks like she has eight arms.

Boss: **Yikes!** I think she does...

Wrapping It Up

These are just a few ways to bring the colorful language of slang into your classroom. I'm sure that whatever methods you choose to bring this new lexicon to your students, you're going to slay! No cap.

Other Useful Resources for Teachers

- [Green's Dictionary of Slang](#): An excellent, well-researched dictionary of slang from today and the past.
- [Forever Dreaming Transcripts](#): Transcriptions of popular television shows and movies.
- [Urban Dictionary](#): Use with caution. While this crowdsourced slang dictionary has many great entries, it also has many inaccurate ones, often entered as jokes. Profanity is common.

A. C. Kemp has been a lecturer in English language studies at MIT since 2007. She has a master's degree in applied linguistics from the University of Massachusetts/Boston. A. C. has also presented extensively on teaching strategies for vocabulary acquisition. Since 2002, she has been the director of [Slang City](#), a website devoted to American slang and colloquial language. She also has a strong interest in ITA training, for which she created the [User-Friendly Classroom Video Series](#) in 2016.

Slang Exclamations!

Way to go!	Good job!/Congratulations! (about something already done)
You and me both!	I am in the same situation as you.
Yeah, right!	That isn't true.
In your dreams!	You wish that would happen, but it won't. (Also, in her/his/their dreams.)
Go for it!	I encourage you to do it! (about something not yet done)
Yikes!	I'm really surprised.
Get lost!	Go away.
I can't even!	I am so overwhelmed/upset that I'm speechless.
For sure!	Certainly.
So what?!	I'm unimpressed.
Welcome to the club!	I'm not sympathetic because I have the same problem.
What else is new?!	Your bad news is not surprising.

Instructions: Take turns reading these statements to your partner and responding with one of the expressions below. Some statements can be answered in several ways.

Student A

1. Are you going to come to class next week?
2. I don't know if I should apply for the scholarship.
3. I finally got Karen to go out with me.
4. I have over a million Twitter followers.
5. I have way too much homework.
6. I think I need to lose 10 pounds.
7. Look at Jeff. He's dyed his hair purple.
8. So, I guess you're pretty mad about Jeff stealing your car.
9. The U.S. Men's soccer team will win the World Cup this year.
10. You know, you'd look prettier if you smiled.

Student B

1. I know over 2,000 three-syllable English words!
2. Wow! I don't have any money.
3. I'm sure you wouldn't mind giving me \$100.
4. I wish I could have told you earlier, but your zipper has been down all evening.
5. How are you feeling? I heard you had to wait at home 3 days for the cable company.
6. I haven't gotten much sleep this week.
7. Would you like to win the lottery?
8. That color looks terrible on you.
9. I'm not sure if I should have another piece of cake.
10. I got an A on the algebra quiz.

Find Someone Who—Slang Version

Find the following people in this class by asking questions. If they say “I don’t” or “I haven’t,” don’t write anything. You can keep asking that person more questions. If they say “yes,” write their name and answer on this page next to the question. Some questions require additional information. For example, for Question #1 you must write the name of the person and their favorite movie. If you are asked to find someone who will perform an action, such as singing, they must sing for you. You will have roughly 1.5 minutes in the breakout room to ask your partner questions before you are switched to a new room. Whoever finds all 10 people first is the winner. If no one finds all 10, the person who has found the largest number will be the winner.

EXAMPLE: Find someone who thinks your favorite movie **slaps**. What is it?

Marie—We both think *Son of Godzilla* **slaps**.

Find someone who...

1. ...thinks your favorite movie **slaps** (is great). What is it?
2. ...has spent too much time **doom-scrolling** (obsessively reading about bad news online) during the pandemic.
3. ...knows the words to a popular song in English and will sing a verse for you.
4. ...**flunked** (failed) their driver’s test. How many times?
5. ...is a **couch potato** (spends too much time watching television and not enough time exercising). What do they like to watch?
6. ...has **freaked out** (gone crazy from anxiety or fear) in the last few weeks. Why did they freak out?
7. ...agrees with you on which athlete is the **G.O.A.T.** (greatest of all time—pronounced *goat*). Who is it?
8. ...is **chill** (relaxed) most of the time.
9. ...tries to look **snatched** (fashionable), even for Zoom meetings.
10. ...already knows some slang in English. What is it?