MORE THAN JUST 'GREAT CRAIC': INTRODUCING SLANG INTO THE SERBIAN ESL CLASSROOM

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Abstract

This essay, structured around the Serbian educational system, argues in favour of incorporating slang into the national ESL curriculum. The paper opens with a theoretical examination of slang's linguistic, legal and institutional status to set a wider framework for the discussion about the significance and benefits of integrating slang into the ESL classroom. The essay then proceeds to reflect on the results of a case study, conducted at Vazduhoplovna akademija [the Aviation Academy] in Belgrade, testing the hypothesis put forward in the essay. The practical experience shows that teenagers already have certain knowledge of slang, picked up through various informal channels, which needs to be refined, broadened and activated in an adequate manner. The only way to come to grips with the vast influx of slang words and phrases, echoing from all corners of mass media and the Internet, is to embrace them. Yet, there are legal constrains in regard to the amount of teachers' freedom in curriculum design, which ought to be revisited in foreseeable future. The conclusion, emphasising the standpoint that understanding slang and its characteristics is more of a necessity than an asset, states that effective teaching of slang does not focus on words per se but, rather, on a systematic analysis of its nature, usage and connotations that it carries.

Key Words: slang, ELT, Serbia, secondary education, curriculum design

Introduction

In recent months, I have encountered a number of instances suggesting that English language teachers do not prepare their students properly for the so-called real-world situations. One such example was a poster from a popular Internet portal called 9gag, confidently stating: 'Video Games – Teaching English since 1980's better than English Teachers... [sic]' (n.d.). Naturally enough, as a future English teacher I felt somewhat offended by the message of this poster: while I wish my prospective students to surround themselves with English as much as they can – be it through films, music, video games or some other source – I am well aware of the fact that picking up language solely through these means can easily result in flawed knowledge of grammar, which is evident from the post itself, where glaring errors in word order, article choice and punctuation crept in. Regardless of the various methods in which ESL is learnt nowadays, I love to believe that teachers of English are still irreplaceable, for they are the ones who ought to acquaint students with grammatical structures not easily detectable otherwise. Video games, albeit rich in lexis, do not necessarily provide one with a comprehensive study of mixed conditionals or the present subjunctive, to name but a few.

Notwithstanding the paramount importance of teaching grammar, which has been institutionally recognised and endorsed, I have noticed that the official curriculum of the Serbian educational system, on the example of which I will structure my paper, seems to be strictly grammar-oriented, which is why students, as the poster suggests, tend to learn more lexical items through copious informal channels than in schools. This is exactly what a web developer from Romania who has recently moved to Dublin with his family, stressed in an interview for The Irish Times: 'I spoke some English, but when you're learning English in school nobody tells you how to say "what's the craic?" or "howrya?" The accent is hard to understand' (Miron, 2015). While the analysis of the latter issue – that of various accents – lies beyond the scope of this essay, the former one represents the very core of this paper. Having taken into account the need for a more thorough investigation of the real language usage, I shall argue that slang is a vital part of every living language, on the grounds of which it qualifies for a closer study in schools, inasmuch as no language can be mastered in 'laboratory' conditions that dismiss the interference of external factors.

With two sections of a theoretical and one, slightly shorter, of a practical nature, the division of the body of my essay is envisaged as tripartite. The paper will open with a theoretical examination of slang's linguistic, legal and institutional status to set a wider framework for the discussion about the significance and benefits of integrating slang into the ESL classroom. The essay will then proceed to reflect on the results of a case study, which I have

conducted at Vazduhoplovna akademija [the Aviation Academy] (hereinafter: Aviation Academy) in Belgrade, as a part of my mandatory teaching practicum. In this section, the emphasis will be on the materials prepared specially for the purposes of this research and their reception by the students. Criticism on incorporating slang into the ESL classroom is substantial yet addressing this aspect in greater detail falls outside the domain of this essay, insofar as my overriding aim is to prove that, despite all the drawbacks, which undeniably do exist, tackling slang in high schools, particularly in lessons of the second language, is not only beneficial but truly important. Based on Carol Robinson and Peter Kakela's (2006) observation that 'students learn better when can they connect new information with what they already know and with what is meaningful to them' (p. 203), it is my belief that engaging directly with slang, the type of language commonly picked up through informal means, can bridge the gap between standard English, rigidly enforced in schools, and colloquial 'real-life' language, which we are more likely to hear in live conversations conducted in English-speaking environments.

The Status of Slang within ESL Classrooms and outside Them

Before we venture into the discussion of introducing slang into the ESL classroom, I deem it necessary to briefly summarise the status of slang in general. Defining 'slang', the term central to this paper, shall serve as a solid starting point: according to *The American Heritage Dictionary* (n.d.), it as '[a] kind of language occurring chiefly in casual and playful speech, made up typically of coinages and figures of speech that are deliberately used in place of standard terms for added raciness, humor, irreverence, or other effect'. In other words, its three main characteristics are that it is used in informal contexts, that it belongs predominantly but not exclusively, as we shall see at a later point, to the domain of the spoken language and that it is used intentionally in lieu of the standard forms with a view to producing a certain effect. To avoid terminological inconsistency, I would like to outline my understanding of what belongs to slang, as this is a rather fluid category. Whilst I, almost entirely, concur with a set of criteria established by Boris Hlebec (2006) in his dictionary of slang, our approaches diverge at one point: namely, Hlebec systematically excluded terminological jargons typical for a certain profession, but, since I was doing my teaching practicum at the Aviation Academy, I decided to take my students' interests into consideration and include aviation jargon along with what I would have included in a non-specialised high school. Thereby, I left out technical terminology, which students cover in their lessons of English for special purposes, and searched for common instances of humorous language used informally by the members of air- and groundcrew alike.

Although slang is a colloquial type of speech, this is not what prevents it from entering ESL coursebooks on a larger scale. This restriction, so to speak, is due to the fact that slang is much more intimate than simple conversational style, inasmuch as it is limited to the certain parts of population, most commonly younger generations or socially deviant groups; henceforth, using slang would be appropriate in a relatively small number of situations in comparison with a purely conversational style (Hlebec, 2006). Nevertheless, whilst in the past informal structures, with the exception of pronoun-verb contractions, were left out of books by default, in recent decades there has been a significant shift in this respect. I have compared two UK-published coursebooks and both of them teach formal and informal types of writing (Harris et al. 2000; L. and J. Soars, 2012) and occasionally include certain slang words or expressions, particularly in texts that are intended to check reading comprehension. Although one of these coursebooks was designed for pre-intermediate and the other one for intermediate students, I arrived at the conclusion that the approach to informal discourse is approximately the same, notwithstanding the level. As well as these two books, foreign language teachers usually focus on the standard forms, thus neglecting the colloquial ones, even when they are highly aware of their pertinence. As a result, many students mirror their teacher's opinion on the supremacy of the formal discourse and reluctantly believe in the preconception that ESL lessons should be devoid of any element that deviates from the standard language. To underpin my argument, I shall briefly describe a situation that I witnessed during my teaching practicum at the Aviation Academy.

In one of the lessons, 'dunno' appeared in the text (L. and J. Soars, 2012). My host teacher Danijela Manic explained that it is a colloquial word or, more specifically, a contraction of '(I) do not know' (2015). A couple of days later, when students were revising for the written test, the teacher asked one of her students to explain the meaning of 'dunno'. The student replied 'I don't know', adding that he though that this word was 'not important' and 'should not be used' because it is informal. I am not one hundred percent sure whether he responded to the question (absolutely correctly, by a neat irony) or declared his ignorance on the topic, but, in any case, I have to admit that I find his whole response thought provoking. Labelling a word as 'not important' probably referred to the fact that it would not appear on the next written test. The presumption about avoiding the word in speech probably also referred to examination. The teacher admitted that the explanation she had given in the previous lesson was not detailed enough and invited me to elaborate on the usage of this contraction, which originated in the mid-19th century (*The Dictionary of American English*, n.d.). I explained that while 'dunno' should not be used in formal contexts – replying to a formal email to your teacher with 'dunno' would be a faux pas – using it as a response to a

friend, either in a live or online conversation, would be absolutely acceptable. In addition, I argued that in informal conversations 'dunno' or 'don't know' would be preferable in comparison to the long form as the abbreviated ones are more appropriate in the given situation. This curious incident implies that students are not well acquainted with the effect that various contexts can have upon usage, which is why they dismiss informal words as irrelevant. In other words, there is a discrepancy between the English that they learn in school and the one they spontaneously pick up through various casual channels. It is my belief that teachers should act as mediators whose task is to narrow the gap between the two conflicting spheres by introducing slang into the circuit of classroom topics.

When contemplating innovations in public schools, one needs to consider the legal framework as well. In an informal conversation with my host teacher, I learned that the official high school curriculum dedicates little attention to informal structures. The same applies to the ESL syllabus followed at the Aviation Academy: over the course of four years, students in this high school have three lessons per week – two of general and one of aviation English – but not a single one of those concentrates on slang. Since the year 2000, when the reform of the Serbian educational system started, high school teachers have been given certain freedom, especially where the choice of coursebooks is concerned. In accordance with the recently-adopted Law on Coursebooks, teachers of ESL are free to select a coursebook of their own preference from the list of those approved by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, which is revised every four years (Art. XVI, Sec. 1). While the processes of publishing a coursebook or passing a law amendment are lengthy ones, which is probably why some more developed countries, such as the Netherlands, have given up on the traditional type of curricula and moved towards the system which is instructional rather than prescriptive, the pace at which slang changes is incredibly fast. Since slang belongs to the domain that can hardly be regulated in a traditional sense, its inclusion in the ESL classroom is almost totally dependent upon the teacher themselves. This is why I firmly believe that in forthcoming years, the Serbian educational system, if not as a whole than at least where foreign-language teaching is concerned, should look up to the Dutch system, which has proved to be one of the most efficient in the world:

The Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science sets a general national curriculum framework. The framework outlines suggested time allocation and attainment targets (what students should know and be able to do) for subject areas and cross-curricular topics. However, schools are free to teach the core subjects in any way they see fit, provided they meet the attainment targets. ('Netherlands: Instructional Systems', 2009)

I am convinced that the ESL students in Serbia would benefit much from adopting a similar approach, especially because of the undeniable existence of the so-called 'grey areas', the most obvious proponent of which is, of course, slang. These scarcely controllable areas resist being regulated through the official legislative channels prescribed by the government, owing to their unpredictable and continuously changing character.

Now that we are slightly better acquainted with the legal framework of the Serbian educational system, the context in which this study takes place, we should pause for a moment to step outside the context of applied linguistics. For the sake of answering the question of to what degree slang can be studied in real time, considering its rapidly changing pace, this issue ought to be examined from a wider linguistic perspective. Slang's creative potential is undoubtedly of great interest to researches around the world but to what extent can its fluctuating nature be captured? One might argue, quite rightly, that slang's ever-changing structure resists being institutionalised by getting into dictionaries. Although the rationale behind slang dictionaries has often been brought into question. insofar as, 'today's "youth speak" is tomorrow's "granny slang" (Powell, 2014, p. 27), such dictionaries do exist. In my opinion, the debate whether slang dictionaries are of use or not belongs to a pre-Internet era and refers mainly to the printed medium. To support my viewpoint, I searched for figures on Alexa, a daily updated Web site tracking statistics of popular Web pages, and discovered that Urban Dictionary has been ranked among the world's top 620 Web pages in the last three months ('Competitive Intelligence', 2015). Worth of Web's report on Urban Dictionary reveals equally impressive data: the estimated number of unique visitors is some 3.8 million per day and around 1.3 billion per year (2015). In contrast, the circulation number of Boris Hlebec's printed bilingual dictionary of English/Serbian slang, supposedly well known to a Serbian audience, is only one thousand copies. I myself prefer the crowdsourced online dictionaries of slang for a number of reasons, even though these are not necessarily as reliable as the printed ones. This facet has seen remarkable improvements lately, primarily thanks to the implementation of a new system that enables the website's users to vote the definition up or down, in accordance with their own linguistic competence.

The issue of compiling dictionaries of slang is inseparably connected with the instability of informal lexis. For instance, if we take a closer look at *The Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger, 1994), a novel famous for its frequent but, moreover, distinctive use of the vernacular, we will see that some of the slang words and expressions he uses are still recognisable – truly, some of them have even entered the mainstream – whereas others are completely outdated and a modern reader would not be able to understand them without consulting a comprehensive dictionary. To state

a more recent example, we could talk about the jargon of a once-popular social network MySpace. Statistics reveal that 'at the height of its popularity [in 2006], MySpace was the most popular site in the entire US . . . That dominance, however, didn't last very long, as Facebook overtook MySpace in the number of American users by June 2009' (Schenker, 2015). Urban Dictionary counts at least 350 slang words and expressions related to MySpace, most of which were added to the dictionary in the period from 2005 to 2009. Nonetheless, with the decline of the social network in question, brilliant slang words such as 'myspic' – shortened for MySpace picture ('Myspic', 2006) – and 'myspaceide' – to delete oneself's MySpace profile ('Myspaceiede', 2006) – disappeared from speech altogether, as the need for them gradually ceased.

From this thumbnail sketch of slang's unstable nature, it is clear that the attempt to include this type of colloquial language in coursebooks would be short-lived. In Serbia, at present, it is up to the teacher to tackle this sphere, on the condition that there is some time left when they cover all areas of the broadly-based curriculum. Let us, for a brief moment, forget that this is the actual situation and imagine that Serbia has miraculously switched to the aforementioned instructional system, favoured by the Dutch authorities (although I deem this move highly unlikely in foreseeable future). The questions that would arise thereby are manifold. Would teachers in Serbia be capable of undertaking the challenge of organising their lessons independently? Would the results be as impressive as they have been in the Netherlands? Having researched into this issue, I came across an interview from 2012, in which Desanka Radunovic, the then president of the National Education Council of the Republic of Serbia, expressed her views on this complex issue relating to the limitations of teacher's freedom. Radunovic stated that the fear that giving teachers more freedom might result in anarchy is absolutely unjustified, for there are countries, such as the aforementioned Netherlands, which have no official curriculum whatsoever, yet students from these countries achieve excellent results on international standardised testes. Radunovic further asserted that teachers in Serbia have not been trained enough over the course of the reform years to contribute to curriculum design, concluding that they are not ready to fully materialise the freedom they have been given. In spite of my disagreement with Radunovic's assessment apropos of the extent of freedom that Serbian teachers have at the moment, I strongly concur with her standpoint on the feasibility of such a project. In lieu of tying teachers' hands, as it has been the case so far, the government should aspire to enabling them to work independently. Transferred to the domain of our case in point, we can say that even if slang was included in the curriculum, the competent ministry cannot prescribe exactly what should be studied as slang changes. This is why I believe that the authorities should encourage lifelong learning, through the organisation of conferences, workshops and seminars, which are the key to a successful and modern educational system. The Ministry of Education and various NGOs are indeed working in this direction and I hope that in the years ahead this strategy will show significant progress, particularly where ESL is concerned.

The Importance and Benefits of Introducing Slang into the ESL Classroom

The evidence that teaching slang is an issue that has gained global relevance can be found in Ernest Heiman's (1967) essay, which vividly describes most teachers' reaction to encountering slang:

So often we hold a stigmatic view of slang. We red-pencil it in compositions; we correct it in class recitations; and we are amused by it, or ignore it in the corridors, where the classroom dialect we foster within our own rooms seems somehow to have lost its franchise. (p. 249)

Further evidence lead us to London, where, some two years ago, one school went so far that the staff composed a list of slang words and expressions that should not be used in school. According to Carmen Fishwick's (2013) article in the Guardian, 'the initiative introduced in September [2013], by the school's new principal Chris Everitt, hopes to raise awareness about the use of language and prepare students for formal situations such as job interviews'. It is a foregone conclusion that the subject of this paper would appall the principal in question; yet, I am of the opinion that it is high time educators and everyone involved in the policy-making process faced the linguistic reality. Slang is the most dynamic part of any language: it changes at astonishing speed, it evolves and, eventually, either enters the standard language or vanishes altogether. Therefore, institutions' rigid attitude towards slang need be liberalised; instead of turning a blind eye to a whole segment of a language, teachers, be they of the first or second language, should, metaphorically speaking, try to come up with ways to 'turn their enemy into their ally'. The task that an ESL teacher has is much more delicate than the one set before a language teacher whose students are native speakers of English. The difference lies in the domain of competence: in their own language, students pick up slang through interaction with their peers and use it frequently within their groups of friends, whereas learning slang of a foreign language is usually associated with various indirect sources, such as films, TV shows, lyrics, social networks, et cetera. Students can easily assess whether something is offensive or humorous in their mother tongue, but the case with foreign languages is somewhat different. To put it simply, what you hear in a song is not necessarily what you will hear in a real-life conversation with a native speaker. To illustrate my point, I have

copied an excerpt form a song entitled 'Stupid hoe', co-written and preformed by popular Trinidadian rapper Onika Tanya Maraj (also known as Nicki Minaj):

You a stupid hoe, you a you a stupid hoe

You a stupid hoe, you a you a stupid hoe

You a stupid hoe, you a you a stupid hoe

You a stupid hoe, yeah you a you a stupid hoe

You a stupid hoe, you a you a stupid hoe

You a stupid hoe, you a you a stupid hoe

You a stupid hoe, you a you a stupid hoe

You a stupid hoe, yeah you a you a stupid hoe. (Maraj and Dunham, 2012)

The rest is as explicit as the quoted refrain, but it is not the endless repetition of a coarse word and a lack of poetic value that surprise me but the fact that, despite these, the song, uploaded three years ago, has been played as many as 94 million times on YouTube (2015). The students at the Aviation Academy might not have heard this song but when I tested whether they are familiar with the word 'hoe', most of them knew very well what it means and readily listed an extensive number of synonyms. Hopefully, it will never even cross their mind to use this word but, judging by its frequency in songs, films and other forms of popular culture, they might think that it can be used. One student mentioned 'cunt' as a possible synonym. Explaining the notorious 'C-word' to teenagers is not the most pleasant of tasks, but the Internet will not tell them that it is a 'no-no'; on the contrary, teenagers are bound to learn this one, given that they read, watch or listen to any type of entertainment with explicit content. While explicitness has become the rule rather than the exception in modern-day media, addressing the issue of abusive language is still in its infancy in Serbia as well as in the rest of the world, although some progress has been made in recent year. For instance, administrators of social networks are doing their best to fight the issue of abusive language: while certain networks refuse to publish any type of insulting or vulgar texts in the first place, others act retroactively by deleting any reported content violating the agreed regulations. Be that as it may, much more need be done in this respect, for teenagers can still browse through all sorts of websites and, even if they do not come across foul talk on their favourite social network, they will, in all likelihood, encounter it elsewhere.

From a linguistic perspective, the incredible expansion of the Internet has provoked a mixed reaction: on the one hand, it offers instant access to inexhaustible audio, video and textual materials, especially in English, which is the dominant language of the web, but, on the other hand, it sets many hidden traps for inexperienced language learners. The task of a teacher is to provide their students with guidelines on how to avoid being misled. For instance, I deem it necessary to explain that the slang of the Internet is not the same as the one typically heard in live conversations among native speakers of English. The use of slang in cyber spaces is a rather complex topic, the analysis of which requires a whole collection of essays, but, for the purposes of this paper, we can briefly say that, regardless of being primarily based on American English, it has certain characteristics of its own, different from those prominent in spoken language. A few days ago, the Internet community roared with laughter on Steve Harvey's gaffe made on the live broadcast of the Miss Universe beauty pageant. Declaring a wrong winner is not something one would expect to see on the television, let alone in an event of this size, so it is no wonder the host's blunder went viral. What caught my attention is the vocabulary used to describe this incident: while the formal-style media opted for 'mistake', 'gaffe', 'blunder' and similar words, Internet portal 9gag labelled it as an 'epic fail' ('Miss Universe', 2015). As common as it may be online, 'epic fail' is not a phrase to be used outside the virtual realm. The top definition on Urban Dictionary provides an example taken from a chat between two gamers:

<after getting pwned in a video game>

Player1 Dude, we just got reamed

Player2 Yeah, Epic Fail [emphasis added] ('Epic Fail', 2008)

My wish to reinforce the statement that 'epic fail' belongs predominately to the Internet slang led me to the top definition of 'epic', which also mentions the collocation in question:

the most overused word ever, next to fail. for even more asshole points, use them together to form 'epic fail.'

. . .

saying 'epic win' doesn't make you sound any better, either. and for fucks sake, don't ever say it in person [sic] ('Epic', 2008)

Blunt as it may sound, the definition is perfectly concise: the first part vividly denotes that 'epic fail' has become a cliché, while the concluding note offers an essential usage guideline. The author of the definition ragingly commands, 'don't ever say it in person', and this is the fundamental message that a teacher ought to get across to their students. The teacher does not need to deal with the meaning of 'epic fail', as the students are probably

acquainted with it already; rather, it is vital to instruct them in how to discriminate between the language reserved for the Internet and the one used in the real world.

Along the lines of the debate concerning the online versus offline slang is the issue of regionalism, particularly prominent in a language as widespread as English is today. I have raised this issue in the opening paragraph of the paper by drawing the example of Ovidiu Miron, an expat from Romania who, despite having studied English in school, I presume for a number of years, did not understand a usual Irish greeting upon his arrival in Dublin. Seeing that 'What's the craic?' is as common in Ireland as 'What's up?' is in America, I have been wondering why it is the case, both in Serbia and apparently in neighbouring Romania, that this expression fails to reach ESL students. Dedicating more time to non-dominant varieties of English, which should be done for the sake of avoiding considerable misunderstandings, would certainly reduce, if not completely eliminate this problem. Instead of confining our attention solely to British and American English, we need to expose ESL students to as many different varieties of English as possible, focusing especially on those words and phrases that are fairly common, as is the case with 'craic', and those that can cause confusion. For example, what bewilders foreigners in New Zealand is 'sweet as', pronounced exactly the same as 'sweet ass', but meaning 'sweet', 'awesome', 'cool' or, simply, 'good' or 'okay'. Likewise, Irish 'locked', meaning 'very drunk', can cause much perplexity if taken literally.

Thus far, I have touched upon the regional proliferation by dealing with slang inherent to different varieties of English but I have yet to discuss slang that has originated as a result of English's contact with other languages. Although, globally speaking, English exerts the most powerful influence beyond the borders where it is spoken, even the lingua franca of today is not immune to importing elements of foreign cultures. It is safe to assume that slang is a reliable indicator of these influences, for it reflects tendencies that the standard language is trying to resist. In Canada, English has coexisted with Francophone culture for centuries now, the result of which is, among others, 'alcool', the French word for 'alcohol', brought to Canadian English to denote grain alcohol ('Alcool', 2004). Across the southern border, Spanish has had a great impact upon American English, owing to a large population of Mexicans living in the United States. In this way, 'amigo', used to denote a 'friend' in standard Spanish, becomes a slang word with the same meaning when transferred into English ('Amigo', 2004). Another common example of Spanglish heard across the US is 'vato', meaning 'homeboy', 'dude' or 'guy', which is colloquial in Spanish as well ('Vato', 2002). Similarly, across the Atlantic, the word 'craic', mentioned on multiple occasions throughout this essay, is a great way to bring to light the subject of the status of the English language in the Republic of Ireland, for its spelling personifies what Ó Muirithe (1992) terms 'the constant Gaelicisation of the good old English-Scottish dialect' (154). Namely, 'craic', initially spelt 'crack', is a result of the process which Myers (2010) terms 'pseudo-Gaelicisation'. Nowadays, the Gaelic spelling of this word is more common in Ireland, whereas 'crack' is prevalent elsewhere. The belated interference of Gaelic orthography is indicative of the Irish government's insistence upon Gaelic, which is the first official language of the Republic, even though the report 'Ethnicity, Irish Language and Religion', based on the results of the 2011 census, demonstrates that, outside of the education system, merely 55,554 persons speak Gaelic on a daily basis (2012). Instances of foreign language's influence upon different varieties of English, supremely exemplified in slang, as we have seen from 'alcool', 'amigo', 'vato' and 'craic', can show students of ESL that English does not exist in isolation and help them understand better its relationships with other contact languages.

Slang, despite being usually associated with verbal production, can also appear in writing. Formerly, literary works were one of the few sources of slang in writing. Shakespeare, Joyce and Salinger, among others, were particularly fond of adding local 'colour' to their literature. In *Ulysses*, Joyce used slang frequently, 'sometimes including words and phrases from the foreign languages he knew so well but often ones from the Dublin of his youth' (MacArthur, 2004, pp. 523–524). To illustrate the effect that thoughtful use of slang can produce in a piece of writing, I will quote an excerpt from Kazuo Ishiguro's (1999) modern classic *The Remains of the Day*:

There is a group of six or seven people gathered just a little way behind me who have aroused my curiosity a little. I naturally assumed at first that they were a group of friends out together for the evening. But as I listened to their exchanges, it became apparent they were strangers who had just happened upon one another here on this spot behind me. . . . It is curious how people can build such warmth among themselves so swiftly. It is possible these particular persons are simply united by the anticipation of the evening ahead. But, then, I rather fancy it has more to do with this skill of *bantering*. Listening to them now, I can hear them exchanging one bantering remark after another. . . . Perhaps it is indeed time I began to look at this whole matter of bantering more enthusiastically. After all, when one thinks about it, it is not such a foolish thing to indulge in particularly if it is the case that in bantering lies the key to human warmth [emphasis added]. (p. 257–258)

The protagonist's inner monologue, this pondering on 'the matter of bantering', is a brilliant example of slang's intrusion on an otherwise strictly formal text. It is a technique students can employ in their own production. Of course, every medal has two sides, which is what Heiman (1967) is trying to point towards in his study of slang's role in teaching linguistics:

The student should be capable of determining inductively the advantages and disadvantages of using slang in their writing. Slang, when used with discretion, will add color and force, of a type, to compositions. However, the great disadvantage to the indiscriminate use of slang is its lack of precise denotation' (p. 252) I am of the opinion that ESL students should be encouraged to experiment with combinations of formal and informal elements in writing, given that they are clearly warned of potential adverse consequences.

The final entry on this list of benefits brought by the introduction of slang into the ESL classroom is the one mentioned in the very title. Although the focal point of this essay is to prove that teaching slang is, in fact, much more than just 'great craic', now that I have presented my argumentation in favour of slang, I ought to explain what has often been taken for granted, *id est* why it is considered to be enormous fun. Every mention of a taboo subject provokes a reaction: utter a mild swearword, speak of menstruation or sex, and you will hear your students giggling. Earlier today, Prince William swore on television, leaving the programme's audience flabbergasted, judging by their reaction on Twitter. As a result, 'people seem to like him more for it', if Louis Doré's (2016) analysis of a sizeable portion of tweets hashtagging the rare incident is to be believed. Figures of authority, be they heirs to the throne or simply teachers, are considered to be paragons of virtue: neither does the British public expect to hear 'bollocking' from their future king nor high school students to discuss sexual terminology or crude insults with someone their senior. Considering that slang is a type of language that teenagers use furtively, hiding from their parents or teachers, I presume that it is the lure of 'forbidden fruits' that makes this topic so appealing. What this means for the classroom is that undivided attention, a prerequisite for success, is guaranteed. 'Edgy' topics such as slang break the monotony imposed by prescriptive grammar rules and numerous unfamiliar words, thereby inspiring close engagement and creating a convivial atmosphere, which is an invaluable ingredient in ELT.

A Case Study: Aviation Academy

I have had the opportunity to practically test out my hypothesis on the benefits of using slang in the ESL classroom, put forward in the theoretical part of this essay. At the time of conducting this research I was doing a teaching practicum at the Aviation Academy in Belgrade, as a part of fulfilling my MA requirements. The practicum, which consists of lesson observations and student teaching, was carried out over a period of approximately two months through a series of visits to the school. I worked with five classes comprising twenty-four 16-year-old students, attending the second grade of high school. The main reason why I had chosen this school is because it places marked emphasis on the English language: each class has two lessons of general English and one of English for special purposes per week. Lessons of general English are carried out is groups of twenty-four, while, for aviation English, students are further divided into groups of twelve. In comparison to other Belgrade high schools, where classes can have up to forty students, these are rather small groups. Under the optimum conditions for ELT, a teacher can devote close attention to every student and monitor their progress. Although the official curriculum was designed for pre-intermediate level, I soon discovered that the students' objective level of English is higher, that is intermediate to upper-intermediate. It is this discrepancy that allowed me to undertake a case study on slang, particularly with some more advanced classes, which managed to accomplish the stated objectives set by the Ministry of Education well before the end of semester. In the paragraphs to follow I shall briefly recapitulate the course of the practical research, thereby focusing on the exercises prepared specially for the purposes of this study.

Prior to venturing into the exercises themselves, I opened a five-minute discussion about slang, with a view to discovering the students' prevailing attitude towards slang, both in Serbian and in English. The initial thrill, openly expressed with audible cheers when I introduced the topic, was a clear signal of great fondness for the subject. Without exception, the students confirmed that they use slang regularly, mainly in conversation with their peers. Furthermore, they stated that their knowledge of slang in English stems predominantly from social networks, films and song lyrics. The first exercise that I had prepared served me to assess students' general knowledge of English slang. The emphasis was on regional proliferation. As I expected, they perfectly understood American English and there was no need for me to explain any of the informal words that appeared in this dialogue. British English came the second easiest, for they were familiar with some words, but struggled with others, such as 'fagged', 'fag' and 'kwl'. There was a significant gap between the first two places, on the one hand, and the last three, on the other hand. Australian/New Zealand English was the easiest of the 'difficult' ones, whereas Irish and Scottish came last respectively. In the conversations in Australian/New Zealand and Irish English they understood slang imported from the UK and the US, such as 'mate', 'lad' and 'bf', but not the phrases typical for these regions

such as Australian 'drinking with the flies' or Irish 'yer man'. Scottish was exceptionally hard to comprehend in every respect, from lexical items 'sonsie' and 'dreich' to functional words 'nae' and 'hoo'.

As for identifying the variety of English, it should come as no surprise that students unmistakably recognised American English, whereas they had problems determining the region of the other four conversations. In particular, they were not able to differentiate between British and Australian, and between Scottish and Irish English. In my attempted to make these dialogues as authentic as possible, I took into account Sarah Powell's (2014) observation on the multifarious nature of contemporary slang, expressed in her review of a slang dictionary:

Although most of the terms in the dictionary are from British culture, the number of words and popular phrases 'borrowed' from the USA and Australia speaks volumes about the way in which modern media generates contemporary slang. The Internet has created a universal language shared by mouse potatoes, using acronyms (LOL, OMG) and amalgamations (adorkable, facepalm) to communicate. Back in the day, film and television served the same purpose, transplanting into the vocabulary of British teens Valspeak from California and choice exclamations like 'chuck a mental' from Australia via the television programme Neighbours.

Mindful of this enhanced heterogeneity, I envisaged each of the five dialogues to spotlight a single region but, as a sign of authenticity, I included influences coming from other areas as well, in order to reflect the linguistic landscape as accurately as it can be done in such a small language portion. Henceforth, most of the conversations contain borrowings imported from other English-speaking parts of the world, mostly from the dominant ones such as the US and the UK. It is interesting that, in spite of Serbia's institutional favouritism towards the British variety of English, the students' knowledge of informal British is still rudimentary: even when they do understand common British slang, such as 'lad' or 'mate', they fail to associate them with the UK. Their knowledge of informal American English, however, is, to say the least, impressive. The overall analysis of this exercise points to the conclusion that students in Serbia should be more exposed to the varieties of English other than American and British.

In the theoretical part of this essay, I have attached due weight to the implementation of 'real-life' language into the classroom realm. To prove that I do 'practice what I preach', I made an exercise using authentic language samples. In understanding of what 'authentic materials' are, I have relied on Charlene Polio's (2014) definition, who writes that 'although there are various definitions of authentic materials, I am referring here to materials that were not created for language learning purposes. Instead, they were created with some real-life goal for, generally, native speakers' (p. 1). Finding appropriate lines to teach slang can be quite challenging considering that it is mostly used in oral communication. What is more, I was determined to avoid Internet slang, for the reasons I have stated in earlier paragraphs. With little choice left, I asked a couple of my friends, who are native speakers of English, to take screenshots of their chats, be it on WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger or Viber. Various YouTube video interviews and Internet resources in general can also serve the purpose. Once I had collected the authentic material, I selected the conversations containing vivid examples of slang, such as 'locked', 'dunno', 'defo', 'tomoz', 'libro', 'byob', 'lip', et cetera. The main issue that I encountered was that most original conversations were so vulgar that they required censorship. Indeed, teaching slang has often been criticised for promoting vulgarity and this view stems from the very nature of slang. As Alma Sokolija (2013) points out in her paper, slang often deals with the topics that the standard language seeks to avoid or euphemise, such as crime, sex, drug abuse, death and so forth (p. 351). Insofar as slang breaks the deep-seated taboos, it is rather difficult to prepare authentic material appropriate for the classroom discussion. Even with certain lines left out, I deem this approach worth the effort, for it is rich in informal structures and offers plenty of possibilities for a contextualised discussion. Lastly, when preparing authentic material, the visual aspect should be taken into consideration. When copied on computer and printed in the form of a plain text, the authentic lines fail to appear so. Out of six genuine conversations, the students found only the last one, which kept the original message layout, to be credible. If you want to make an exercise that looks realistic yet protects someone's identity, I suggest making screenshots using one of many fake message generators. These programmes are also handy in making your non-authentic materials look credible.

The third exercise is school-specific, although it could be of interest to a wider audience. Having taken into consideration my students' future professions, I dedicated one exercise to aviation slang. As I have already mentioned, students at the Aviation Academy have separate lessons of English for special purposes, which concentrate on technical terms and aviation jargon in general. To compile this third exercise I used 'A Glossary of Aviation Terms and Abbreviations' (2008) for pilot slang, 'The Insider's TSA [Transportation Security Administration] Dictionary' (Harrington, 2012) for the slang of ground personnel and, finally, 'The Secret Language of Flight Attendants is Your New Inflight Entertainment' (Strutner, 2014) for the slang of flight attendants. Having in mind that the Aviation Academy prepares its students for a broad spectrum of aviation-related professions, I focused on these three broad categories, with the intention of covering as many different fields as possible. In a non-

specialised high school, it would be much more difficult to draw a single matter, which would kindle the curiosity of the majority. In these instances, the teacher can opt for subjects generally considered to be of interest to teenagers, such as sports, music and so forth.

The fourth exercise is somewhat different from the previous ones in that its goal is long-term. John Follman composed a list of a number of successful methods for enhancing pupils' and students' L1 vocabulary. Based on the calculation that school children learn about thirteen words per day, only about two of which in school (Miller and Gildea, 1987), Follman (1990) particularly stressed 'avocational' method, which involves students 'learn[ing] vocabulary incidentally through reading material that interests them' (p. 329). Although the statistics is, as the author himself admits (Follman, 1990), inconsistent, the 6.5:1 ratio that Miller and Gildea (1987) came up with is highly significant in that it underlines the effectiveness of learning outside the classroom. Although gathering accurate numerical data for L2 is even more complicated, if not impossible, mainly because the learning process is highly individual and depends on the learner's motivation and previous knowledge, the mechanisms of expanding vocabulary are similar. Henceforth, with Follman (1990) premise in mind that, 'outside of school . . . is potentially the most profitable area in which to attempt to enhance pupils' vocabulary' (p. 330), I tried to encourage the students to engage in avocational reading on a larger scale. To help them, I made a list of websites popular with teenagers in English-speaking countries, advising them to build the habit of reading at least one article per day. Well aware of the fact that most students use social networks regularly, I tried to select those sources that have active Facebook pages. The logic behind this is simple: if a student 'likes' the suggested page, texts will start to appear in their 'news feed', hopefully, drawing their attention. By reading these texts, students will see slang 'in intelligible contexts', which Miller and Gildea (1987) consider to be the key of enriching vocabulary. As an illustration, I prepared a text downloaded from a student online magazine called The Tab about an American girl who has moved to the UK. The purpose of this article was twofold: apart from explaining some common UK slang words such as 'cheeky' and 'banter', 'Being an American in Durham can be confusing' (Appicelli, 2015) demonstrates how cultural differences are embodied in the intralingual conflict. In this way, the text signals that slang of another region can be as challenging for native speakers as it is for foreign learners of the given language.

Conclusion

Seeing that excluding slang from the ESL classroom has been a widely accepted practice, I have neither spent the words promoting nor defending this deep-rooted tradition. Rather, I have tried to show that in a world where the rate of changes accelerates exponentially, ELT, in order to remain relevant, needs to adjust its methods and approaches accordingly. By the time we graduate, many of the skills acquired during our studies become dated, let alone over the course of our forty-year-long prospective careers. This means that, to maintain the expected professional standard, an educator will require much determination to keep up with the new trends, be they of linguistic or some other kind. My exploration of the current situation regarding ELT in Serbia's secondary education indicates that there are legal constraints limiting the amount of teachers' freedom. With little room for innovation, slang can be studied only as subsidiary to the standard language on the condition that the teacher can make enough time to deviate off the well-trodden path. Even if greater flexibility were allowed, the question concerning the success of incorporating slang into the circuit of classroom topics would remain open, for teaching a type of language as unstable as it is the case with slang demands ongoing learning along with meticulous preparations for every lesson. The effort of Serbian institutions and NGO's is commendable in regard to the organisation of workshops, seminars and conferences, the aim of which is to help teachers master the secrets of designing curriculum independently.

From the theoretical discussion presented in this paper as well as from my personal experience gained at the Aviation Academy, my conclusion is that putting in some extra effort does pay off for a number of reasons. Firstly, tackling slang reaches out to the students, thus lightening the classroom atmosphere and filling it with zestful excitement. Furthermore, the examples that I have listed in the paragraphs about regional proliferation imply that, with little creativity, educators of ESL can use slang to discuss the worldwide status of English – its overwhelming dominance, on the one hand, and its dynamic relationship with other languages, on the other hand. What is more, discriminate use of slang can add colour to writing, as we have seen from the excerpt taken from a literary classic. Those students who decide to act on this suggestion can see make their writing sound idiomatic and native-like, provided that they find the right measure. Finally, this topic brings tremendous fun, therefore securing students' rapt attention, essential for successful ELT.

While the aforementioned points highlight the benefits that integrating slang brings, I am keen to underline that the knowledge of slang and its characteristics is, in the majority of cases, not an asset but a sheer necessity. This is why I have aimed to depict the discrepancy between the slang found on the Internet and that spoken within the English-speaking communities. The two domains do overlap but not entirely and, since this divergence may not be

visible to the naked eye of the students who happen to encounter slang online on a practically daily basis, it is their teacher's task to warn them of this issue lest they should commit errors of great magnitude. Apart from outlining these differences, it is crucial that ESL lessons cover common words and phrases appearing in the non-dominant varieties of English. This would significantly narrow the gap for which ELT has been condemned, that between the language taught in classrooms and the one spoken in real life. Operating on the principles of taboos, slang is an area that requires utmost delicacy. Sometimes vulgar and insulting, yet full of zest and humor, this controversial layer of a language should no longer be neglected in schools. As we have seen from the practicum conducted at the Aviation Academy, teenagers already have a certain degree of 'raw knowledge' of slang, which needs to be refined, broadened and activated in an adequate manner. The only way to come to grips with the vast influx of slang words and phrases, echoing from all corners of mass media and the Internet, is to embrace them. Integrating slang into the ESL classroom does not necessarily involve teaching words *per se* but familiarising the learner with its nature, usage and connotations that it carries.

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