

## Feature Article

# Swearing: The good, the bad & the ugly

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### Abstract:

*This article explores the cases for and against the inclusion of curriculum about swearing (which includes taboo words) as a part of an Adult ESL course. The function and prevalence of swearing are discussed, including the level of exposure students face. Taboo language makes up 4% to 13% of typical daily language use (Fägersten, 2012; Winters & Duck, 2001, p. 60). Exposure to these words without context is also discussed, as it could potentially put students into embarrassing and sometimes dangerous situations (Hansen, 2016; Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; Jay, 2009; Vingerhoets, Bylsma & DeVlam, 2013). It also explores the proper and improper ways of swearing, and how swearing can actually be beneficial for both professional and interpersonal relationships. Moreover, swearing is becoming more prevalent and is no longer specific to a particular group (Hansen, 2016; Vingerhoets et al., 2013); thus, it is a bigger part of daily language. The article expresses that there are positive reasons as to why teachers might want to include swearing as a part of ESL courses for educational purposes. Suggestions for future research are offered.*

**Key words:** *swearing, taboo, offensive language, curriculum design*

### An Introduction to Swearing

When I taught at a business ESL school in Beijing to 300 students who mostly worked in Fortune 500 companies, we had come upon the threshold of a pervasive epidemic: Many of our students were saying the phrase “Oh my God!” made popular by an American television show. One of our teachers became quite alarmed. He was from a religious part of Wales and wanted to address the problem as he was concerned about not only the students’ safety but also how the misuse of swearing could affect their personal lives as many traveled abroad for business purposes. He felt that if they understood

the true nature of what they were saying, many would be embarrassed. Thus, the school developed a curriculum for swearing. With over 90 students participating, it was our most attended and well received class. It taught students awareness, and the potentially offensive phrase (“Oh my God!”) was effectively eliminated from the students’ speech.

Some teachers incorporate swearing into the classroom, and others steer clear of it because those who swear are often seen as low class, unintelligent, and emotionally or mentally unstable (Vingerhoets et al., 2013). Swearing also evokes strong emotions that could lead

to violence (Jay et al., 2008; Pinker, 2007; Vingerhoets et al., 2013). Moreover, some teachers have even lost their jobs over it. However, leaving students to rely on their peers and coworkers to learn about this aspect of language can also put them at a disadvantage.

Taboo words or swearing (which will be used interchangeably in this article) are a dark and often-ignored part of the language. However, taboo words are used in conversation almost as often as personal pronouns (I, we, our) and are among the most frequently used words in the English language (Fägersten, 2012; Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; Jay, K. & Jay, T., 2015; Vingerhoets et al., 2013). Thus, swearing is something that cannot be ignored as students will eventually hear them.

By including swearing in one's curriculum or addressing it less formally, ESL teachers might be able to help students understand the consequences of using them, avoid dangerous situations, and/or how to use it to their advantage in making social gains. The goal of such a curriculum is not to encourage students to swear, but to comprehend that there are possible benefits one can garner by being knowledgeable about this often-offensive part of the lexicon.

### **What is swearing?**

Swearing, a linguistic universal, is used to express intense emotions (fear, joy, anger, excitement) (Dewaele, 2006; Gawinkowska, Paradowski & Bilewicz, 2013; Jay et al., 2008; Jay 2009; MacKay & Ahmetzanov, 2005; Pinker, 2007; Vingerhoets et al., 2013). Students and teachers should be aware that there are five main types of taboo words that

could possibly trigger negative emotions (Jay, 2009; Pinker, 2007; Vingerhoets et al., 2013). The types are as follows:

1. Supernatural, to evoke awe and fear often connected with religion
2. Bodily effluvia and organs, to evoke disgust
3. Disease, death, and infirmity, to evoke a sense of dread
4. Sexuality, to evoke revulsion and depravity
5. Disfavored people and groups, to evoke hatred and contempt

Using taboo words can have a significant impact on listeners as it can trigger intense positive or negative reactions, which are dependent upon not only the context of the situation but a multitude of other factors as well.

### **Why do people swear?**

Understanding why people swear is important for students in order to better understand the context and respond appropriately. Swearing can either be planned or completely spontaneous. For instance, if a person were to tell a joke using taboo language, this would be considered planned. However, if a person injured themselves and swore due to the pain, this would be considered unplanned. Thus, there are two categories of swearing: Propositional and non-propositional.

Propositional swearing includes dysphemistic, euphemistic, abusive, idiomatic, and emphatic swearing. These kinds of swearing are often used when speakers are aware of their usage and ultimately have an objective (Pinker,

2007). Furthermore, in propositional swearing, dysphemistic swearing is used when a taboo word is chosen rather than a neutral term, such as *mental institution* versus *loony bin*, in order for the speaker to emphasize the emotions they are trying to convey to the listener.

Another type of propositional swearing is euphemisms, which are indirect words used to replace unpleasantries. Euphemisms are used in place of dysphemism, which could be important for students to learn to avoid offending listeners. The warning with using euphemisms is that they may sound strange when they are misused. Hence, it is important to learn how to use euphemisms properly. For example, it would sound rather strange to tell someone that his/her wedding band was too small for their digitus quartus (i.e. ring finger).

Idiomatic swearing (e.g. pain in the ass), is another possible reason as to why someone might swear. It is used to gain attention or appear macho. This can be used to express dominance or strengthen a relationship (Jay et al., 2008; Pinker, 2007; Vingerhoets et al., 2013).

Cathartic swearing, which is non-propositional, is used to relieve tension, increase one's tolerance for pain, or startle or intimidate an attacker. It is considered neither to be polite nor rude (Jay et al., 2008; MacKay et al., 2005; Pinker, 2007; Vingerhoets et al., 2013).

Abusive swearing is always considered rude when it is used to intimidate or humiliate someone. This type can be expressed in metaphors (e.g. You dress like a slut!), advice (e.g. Why don't you go fuck yourself?!), and accusations (e.g. You are being a real

bitch!). The end goal of this type of speech is to bully or gain power (Pinker, 2007; Vingerhoets et al., 2013).

Lastly, there is emphatic swearing (e.g.  *fucking cool*), which is utilized to emphasize something. It is often used to promote social harmony, to express that someone is doing well, or it can be used to intensify a word used to describe an event or person in a negative or positive way (Jay et al., 2008).

As described above, there are many reasons as to why people swear. Most swearing can be correlated with rudeness and negative emotions; however, swearing also may have social value if used correctly, and can even be considered polite (Jay et al., 2008).

### **The frequency of swearing**

Many ESL students, without even realizing it, have already been exposed to swearing. The level of offensiveness though, varies greatly. It must be understood that even words such as *gosh*, *jeez*, and *heck* are seen as swear words (Fägersten, 2012; Jay, 1992; Ljung, 2010; Pinker, 2007; Jay et al., 2015). Students will undoubtedly hear swearing every day whether in conversation, popular movies, books and/or songs. It is almost unavoidable. In a study by Winters and Duck (2001, p. 60), it was found that every 14<sup>th</sup> word uttered by American English speakers was a swear word. Swear words constitute 4% to 13% of everyday speech (Fangersten, 2012).

In total, there are currently 70 different taboo words that are used in conversational American English (Fägersten, 2012; Jay, 2009; Jay et al., 2015; Yoga, 2016). In a survey by Jay

(2009) conducted between 1986 to 2006, it was found that there are ten staple swear words that are used 80% of the time. Fuck and shit account for half of all episodes in counts and appear on the list of 75 most frequently used words (Fägersten, 2012; Jay, 2009; Jay et al., 2015; Robin-Eliece, 1995; Vingerhoets et al.).

Swearing is also prevalent in American media. In an investigation conducted by Jay (1992, p. 272), in 120 films spanning from *E.T.* to *Scarface*, at least 80 taboo words were uttered in a 90-minute film on average. Swearwords can even be found in young adult literature. *Time Magazine* reported that “[Y]oung readers encounter about seven instances of profanity per hour” (Sifferlin, 2012, para. 1). Cabot (2011, para. 1) from CBS highlighted that three of the top-ten pop songs in the US in 2011 used the f-word in the title of the songs. The frequency of swearing in popular culture could lead some non-native speakers (NNSs) to believe that swearing is appropriate in any social situation, or to misunderstand how offensive a word could be. Given the frequency with which taboo words appear in daily life, it needs to be acknowledged that swearing has its place in the English language.

### **A Changing Attitude**

Traditionally, taboo words have been primarily tied to people who are of lower socio-economic classes because they do not run the risk of harming one’s social status (Hansen, 2016; Hughes, 2006; Jay, 2009; Vingerhoets et al., 2013). Power and status also play a role in the frequent swearing done by students and adolescents (Vingerhoets et al., 2013).

However, I had a middle-aged student from Shanghai who was shocked when his 28-year old female boss at a well-respected company told him he did “fucking awesome” in front of everyone after a presentation. He was very confused about the usage of swearing in an office.

This kind of situation may be becoming more commonplace, however, as the workforce is changing. With millennials now in the workforce and baby boomers retiring, there has been an overall normalization of swearing in the office (Hansen, 2016; Pinker, 2007; Vingerhoets et al., 2013). In a large survey of 1,542 workers in a variety of positions in industries such as marketing, IT, R&D, finance and human resources in the United States, it was found that 66% of millennials swear at work (Hansen, 2016). Interestingly, 33% said they would not consider working for a company that prohibited swearing, and almost half said they preferred an environment that included taboo words as part of the work culture (Hansen, 2016). As this group has a larger presence at companies, swearing will probably occur more often in offices. In certain occupations such as health care, police, and the military, swearing was found to be even more common (Jay, 2009; Vingerhoets et al., 2013).

Thus, students who join the American workforce will undoubtedly come across swearing in the workplace, and they must be prepared to understand its role in language.

### **The Risks of Not Knowing**

The dangers of not being able to comprehend swear words correctly could potentially be harmful to ESL students.

Understanding that swear words have different levels of offensiveness is pertinent in being able to identify verbal aggression. Moreover, students are disconnected from swear words because they do not have the same impact as they would on a native speaker (Dewaele, 2006).

According to Waters (2007), swearing is the modern-day form of brute force, but NNSs have trouble understanding the degree of offensiveness. In a study by Dewaele (2006), lower, intermediate and advanced Arab, Asian, and Hispanic students and native speakers (NSs) were asked to judge the offensiveness of swear words. It was shown that even advanced Arab and Asian ESL students had significantly more trouble recognizing and judging the intensity of different emotions in regards to taboo words than NSs. Spanish speakers fared better than Arab and Asian students but still scored significantly lower than NSs.

In a study by Gawinkowska et al. (2013), it was found that NNSs emotionally distance themselves from taboo words, and they do not have the same impact as they would on NSs. Students from a university in Poland were tested by translating an English text into Polish, their first language (L1) and a Polish text into English, their second language (L2), which contained taboo words. When they translated from their L1 to their L2, the subjects used stronger language and even added taboo words to the text. However, when they translated from their L2 to L1, it was found that taboo words were softened, even omitted in some instances. This finding illustrates that most NNSs do not understand the levels of offensiveness,

which could prove to be costly (Dewaele, 2006; Gawinkowska et al., 2013; Jay et al., 2008; Jay, 2009, Vingerhoets et al., 2013).

Even more interesting to note is that Asian and Arab students were more likely to swear in English than any other NNSs because of the possible social, cultural and political constraints in their own cultures (Dewaele, 2006; Gawinkowska et al., 2013). Some even prefer to swear in their L2 while interacting with NSs of their L1. This may be because these students from Arab and Asian countries fail to fully comprehend the seriousness as well as the consequences of certain taboo words, especially discriminatory language.

Furthermore, students might have already learned swear words but incorrectly. Popular educational books for learning “real American English” in Asia are introducing extremely emotionally charged four-letter words as a part of natural speech. An example of one of these books was shown on the popular foreigner blog site, shanghaiist.com (2013). The book had the following example: “We’re doing 60 in heavy traffic, and all of a sudden this cuntface pulls into my lane. No fuckin’ signal, either.” The term cuntface was translated as “hateful guy” in Chinese. This is extremely misleading to Chinese ELLs because the degree of the offensiveness in the word is downplayed, even though it is thought to be very aggressive and highly inappropriate in most situations. With so much access and exposure to taboo language, students are bound to misuse these words without proper instruction or understanding that some swearwords can provoke extreme emotions, even

violent reactions (Gawinkowska et al., 2013; Jay, 2009; Pinker, 2009; Vingerhoets et al., 2013).

Jay's book (1992, p.105) points out that if a student were to accidentally offend someone and the language of the offended person becomes extreme, this should signal to the student that the person is losing self-control, and the offended person's actions could possibly become violent (Dewaele, 2006; Gawinkowska et al., 2013; MacKay et al., 2005; Pinker, 2007; Vingerhoets et al., 2013). An unusual amount of swearing by a person could also signal that the person has brain damage or a personality disorder (Jay, 2009; Vingerhoets et al., 2013). Recognizing these signs and understanding proper usage and the degree of offensiveness of a swearword should help students avoid these types of situations or know whether the situation has taken a turn for the worse.

It is also important for students to understand that swearing might not necessarily be directed at them. Jay (1992, p. 104) found that when a person who has been injured or is extremely overwhelmed, he or she may use an expletive and/or an exclamation in a cathartic capacity. It has been found in a study by Stephens, Atkins, & Kingston (2009) that swearing can actually increase one's tolerance for pain. This usually indicates that the speaker is not directing the taboo word at the listener, but rather just cooling down and relieving pent up frustrations (Jay et al., 2008; Pinker, 2007; Vingerhoets et al., 2013). By knowing this, the student will most likely interpret that the person is struggling and that the offensive words most likely should not concern them.

Having this knowledge will help them make better choices (Dewaele, 2006; Gawinkowska et al., 2013).

### **Social Gains & Risks of Curse Words**

Swearing is mostly viewed as taboo. However, there are some beneficial aspects to swearing. When used properly, it can lead to tighter bonds and a harmonious environment (Dewaele, 2006; Jay, 2009; Robin-Eliece, 1995; Vingerhoets et al., 2013).

Swearing is a good indication as to how close another person feels to the swearer and whether they consider them part of their intimate social group (Jay et al., 2008; Pinker, 2007; Vingerhoets et al., 2013; Winters et al., 2001). It indicates membership to an exclusive social circle. In a soap factory in New Zealand, it was found that in-member groups were only willing to swear with one another, but not with outsiders (Vingerhoets et al., 2013). Thus, swearing is used to express group membership, and is not class dependent (Jay et al., 2008; Pinker, 2007; Hansen, 2016).

In fact, *Time Magazine* (Steinmetz, 2013) mentioned that swearing has even been proven to create more productive workplaces by inspiring teamwork and improving workplace atmospheres. Workers also reported that they would rather hear swearing than absolute silence (Hansen, 2016).

Some might even consider swearing to be polite under certain circumstances such as complimenting (Fucking brilliant!). The taboo word is used to strongly intensify the quality of their work. It can also show group membership if a group is willing to

swear with someone because it can be a symbol of acceptance and inclusiveness.

Another way in which swearing can help people bond is that when two or more people break social taboos, their relationships improve. Winters (2001, p. 63) said, "Social groups depend on some degree of shared willingness" to participate in taboo practices, swearing being one of them. It is much to the same effect as when children coordinate to steal a goodie from a cookie jar or when people gossip, which has been proven to build stronger relationships.

Unfortunately, NNSs have great difficulty in determining when it is appropriate to swear (Dewaele, 2006; Gawinkowska et al., 2013). Swearing to garner an advantage is dependent on many factors: the relationship of the interlocutors, social and cultural norms, location, the level of formality of the occasion, etc.

People who swear at inappropriate times or when they do not understand their relationships with their listeners often come across as unpersuasive in arguments, appear less intelligent or attractive, and/or are thought of as rebellious, unstable and disrespectful (Dewaele, 2006; Jay, 2009; Vingerhoets et al., 2013; Winters et al., 2001). For ESL learners living in the United States, swearing in the wrong situation or with the wrong person could be detrimental to their reputation as they try to acclimate (Dewaele, 2006; Gawinkowska et al., 2013; Jay, 2009; Vingerhoets, 2013). Students should know to avoid swearing in public with those of higher social status, with overly sensitive individuals, and with children (Winters, 2001).

Swearing can be used to actually improve an ESL learner's work and social life rather than making it worse if they understand the nuances of it. When swearing, having expert timing and knowing one's audience are very important to achieving a positive outcome (Dewaele, 2006; Jay, 2009; Vingerhoets et al., 2013). Using it in just the right context to tease in a friendly manner, joke, relieve social tension during stressful moments, and emphasize important points can have a positive outcome. It can be used as a tool to gain ground among peers, make tighter bonds and create a good reputation.

### **Teaching Swearing**

Teaching swearing can be uncomfortable for the teacher, but it is a large part of the language that might come up. Because taboo words are emotionally charged, schools might consider teaching them as a separate, optional course. Teachers can also broach the subject by discussing taboo words when they come up in class. However, ESL learners who are in the lower levels (levels A1 – B2) lack confidence or have difficulties in understanding the level of offensiveness of taboo words and should probably not use them (Dewaele, 2006; Gawinkowska et al., 2013). Teaching students to consider the purpose, timing, and level of offensiveness of taboo language can help students become more adept at understanding and using it.

Knowing the purpose as to why someone swears can help students identify the difference between a potentially dangerous situation or a normal conversation. It could also make

students aware if they themselves have been misusing a word that could possibly trigger an altercation. Knowing the intonation is equally important in helping students ascertain the context and could help students better decipher situations that pose potential threats.

Learning how, with whom, and when it is appropriate to use this aspect of language can be helpful to students to create stronger relationships and fit in more in their new culture. Moreover, students should be taught not to swear initially with their peers unless they have been fully accepted into the group. To practice judging social appropriacy, students might participate in activities in which they identify the relationship of the speakers and judge whether the listeners are offended. This could be done with reading and listening excerpts, film clips, and roleplays.

The degrees of the level of offensiveness of words should be taught because students are often unable to determine them. Teachers could use a Likert-scale to demonstrate the differences in degrees of offensiveness between words and teach euphemisms that could be used instead to help students better convey what they would like to express. Teachers might also consider teaching the etymology of the word so that students have a better understanding as to why it might be particularly derogatory.

## **Conclusion**

Adult ESL teachers should not ignore the fact that swearing is an important part of language and recognize that they cannot just hope that students can figure it out on their own, especially

when the consequences can be dire, such as losing status, damaging relationships, bullying, and getting into risky situations. Swearing has positive and negative effects, which ultimately depend on the circumstances.

Many NNSs have less of a connection with taboo language. Moreover, Asian and Arab students prefer to swear more in English than NNSs from other countries due to social constraints in their own societies. This could be problematic since students have difficulties in being able to distinguish the levels of offensiveness. Moreover, there is a changing attitude towards the use of taboo words in the workplace and in social situations. Hence, it needs to be understood that swearing is becoming more and more acceptable in the workplace among a variety of people with each new generation (Pinker, 2007). Advanced NNSs need to understand the nuances and pragmatics of swearing in the parlance. Knowing when it is acceptable to swear is difficult for NSs. For an NNS, it is even more so.

Textbooks already exist for teaching swearing for ESL teachers such as *English as a Second F\*cking Language* (Johnson, 1996) and *Watch Your F\*cking Language* (Johnson, 2004). However, more research is needed to be done in this field. Possible topics that could be studied are NNS's common errors in usage and form of swear words, techniques an ESL teacher could use to broach the subject, and methods of teaching taboo words. Taboo words are a dark part of language that expresses emotions, but it is an area that should not be snubbed as it is very much part of daily life.



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