

## Feature Article

# Teaching *about* Taboo Language in EFL/ESL Classes: A Starting Point

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### Abstract

*Although a range of authors have argued for the inclusion of swearing and taboo language in EFL/ESL curriculums (see Mercury, 1995; Horan, 2013; Holster, 2005; Liyanage, Walker, Bartlett, & Guo, 2015; Finn, 2017), to the best of my knowledge, no research has investigated how this could be done in a professional and pedagogically sound manner.*

*With this in mind, the purpose of this article is threefold. First, to present a range of arguments as to why swearing, (potentially) offensive, and taboo language (SOTL) should be covered in English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes. Second, to report on key findings from an action research project I conducted in 4 separate adult EFL classes in Seoul, South Korea aimed at developing an effective strategy for teaching students about SOTL in English. And third, to offer a range of considerations and ideas teachers should bear in mind if they choose to broach this somewhat sensitive subject matter in their English classes.*

**Keywords:** *swearing, EFL/ESL, taboo language, teaching English, swear words, obscenities, cursing*

### Introduction

In English, swearing, offensive and taboo language (SOTL) is most commonly associated with language related to bodily functions, sexual organs, sexual acts, sexual orientation, race and/or ethnicity, certain animals, religion, and gender (Pinker, 2007; Jay, 2009), and may fall into one or more of the following categories - cursing, epithets, profanity, blasphemy, obscenity, vulgarisms, and expletives (Pinker, 2007; Jay, 2009; Stapleton, 2010).

Far from being the type of language that was once almost exclusively used in private conversations held behind closed doors, SOTL has become so ubiquitous in the English language that it is almost impossible to avoid (Winters & Duck, 2001; Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; Vingerhoets et al., 2013; Mohr, 2013). For example, Howe (2012) states that the word ‘*fuck*’ is one of the most commonly spoken and most versatile words in the English language, while Jay (2009) asserts that the average person utters approximately 80-90 words a day that could be considered taboo or offensive. And these numbers do not even take into consideration the amount of times our ears and eyes are bombarded with SOTL, either explicitly or implicitly, on a daily basis

From the explicit use of SOTL in book titles (e.g., *Cunt: A Declaration of Independence* - by Inga Muscio, 1998), advertising campaigns (e.g., *Where the bloody hell are you?* – Australian advertising campaign, 2006), and in countless movies, TV shows, and song lyrics, to the implied use of SOTL used in newspaper headlines (e.g., *Tiger puts balls in wrong place again.* – New York Post headline, 14/04/13), in brand names (e.g., *FCUK* – British fashion label), and in a range of other situations (e.g., *Too Many Mother Ukers* – by the comedy duo Flight of The Conchords) it is clear to see that a) language that may be considered taboo or off limits is no longer on the fringes of everyday English language use, and b) that swearing and taboo language is related to context and culture.

### **Why Teach about Swearing, (Potentially) Offensive, and Taboo Language?**

Before introducing my arguments for teaching about SOTL to adult English-language learners, I would like to draw your attention to an argument put forward by Adams (2002) in relation to including “bad” American English (i.e., SOTL) in liberal arts colleges and university settings in the United States of America. Here, Adams (2002) asserts that “the more knowledgeable and therefore best educated on the subjects of ‘bad’ words and language generally - will likely make the best decisions about their use” (p. 357).

### **Arguments for Teaching about SOTL**

*Argument 1: Prevention is better than cure.*

Taking into consideration the above quote, I would argue that employing the same approach as espoused by Adams, but in the EFL/ESL classroom, would help equip EFL/ESL students with the appropriate knowledge required to understand the various forms and functions of SOTL, thus helping to ensure that English-language students don’t make the types of lexical or pragmatic errors which could cause them (or others) undue embarrassment, stress, or other undesirable ramifications as a result of the misuse or abuse of SOTL.

*Argument 2: Having an understanding of SOTL allows learners to present themselves and their various social identities in ways in which they best see fit.*

Considering language (both “good” and “bad”) is not only used to communicate and express one’s emotions, ideas, and intentions, but also to construct and display one’s various social identities (Andersson & Trudgill, 1990; Stapleton, 2010), I believe it would be remiss of the English language teaching community to avoid teaching about SOTL in EFL/ESL contexts – especially in relation to the pragmatic and social functions of this style of language.

According to Littlewood (1983), failing to acknowledge SOTL in foreign language classes “may unwittingly help to ensure that the speaker of the foreign language remains a ‘reduced personality’, since we are taking away so many of those choices and interpersonal strategies through which, over the course of his life, his personality has learnt to find its expression” (p. 203).

*Argument 3: A professional approach to teaching about SOTL will yield better results.*

Bearing in mind that SOTL is lexically rich, grammatically complex, has a myriad of pragmatic and social functions, is used by the majority of native English speakers, and is a staple in many English-speaking speech communities (Dewaele, 2004; Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; Horan, 2013; Kapoor, 2016), I believe that the issue of teaching about SOTL should be approached in a professional way as to help ensure our students develop knowledge related to the functions (pragmatic and emotional), nuances, and social rules of this type of language.

I would argue that taking an ad hoc method, or allowing students to learn by trial and error, would largely fail to address the cultural, linguistic, grammatical, and pragmatic complexity intricately woven into the very fabric of this style of language and expression.

As such, I advocate for a calculated and pedagogically appropriate approach to teaching about SOTL to be employed by schools and educators working with adult English-learners interested in knowing more about this facet of the English language.

*Argument 4: This will help close the SOTL knowledge and power divide.*

Comprised of arguably the most emotionally charged and powerful forms of expressions available (Pinker, 2007; Dewaele, 2004), SOTL is often used as a form of verbal aggression by those wishing to express their anger, frustration, contempt or, in the worst case, hatred for another person. Now, although SOTL is more commonly used in a social

way (i.e., where the intent of using SOTL is not to offend people, but for social reasons such as rapport building or humour) (Montagu, 2001; Fägersten, 2012), sadly, SOTL is also routinely used to upset, belittle, or abuse others.

With this being true, I would argue that failing to equip our students with a better understanding of how SOTL is used as a form of verbal abuse not only effectively limits their ability to understand potentially dangerous situations, but also robs them of their ability to verbally defend themselves against such attacks if they so wish, thus leaving them powerless in these precarious situations.

In addition, and according to the research, SOTL is often used to display various social identities and as a marker of group membership (Daly et al., 2004; Stapleton, 2010) and solidarity (Wilson, 2018). As such, and considering that research reveals that there is a broad knowledge gap between native English speakers and non-native speakers in relation to SOTL (Dewaele, 2007; Deaele, 2018), explicit instruction on how SOTL can be used for identity construction (and other social functions) may not only serve to reduce the knowledge gap that currently exists between native and non-native English speakers in relation to SOTL, but also allow them to construct their various social identities in ways that best suit their needs and desires.

## **Summary**

In sum, I believe teaching about SOTL is important (especially for those wishing to work, live or study in an English-speaking environment) for several reasons. First, to help prevent usage mistakes which could potentially cause a range of undesirable consequences for the transgressor. Second, to inform adult learners about the range of ways SOTL can be employed to fulfil various social functions (e.g., for humor, rapport building, and to show in-group membership). Third, to allow adult learners to not only better understand the power and impact this style of language has, but also to show how SOTL can be employed to display a range of emotions (positive and negative) and social identities. Finally, to facilitate closing the language divide and ensuing power gap that often exists between native speakers and non-native speakers of English in regards to SOTL.

## **Teaching about SOTL in the EFL/ESL Classroom**

Before moving on to outline and discuss the action research I undertook in order to develop a set of guidelines for teaching about SOTL in EFL classrooms, I would like to suggest that as educators, and in relation to SOTL, it is not our responsibility to take on

the role of moral compass and/or pretend that “bad” language is not a fact of modern-day English practice. Instead, it is our role to not only help our students develop the required lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic knowledge required to use English to communicate effectively, but also to facilitate our students’ abilities to present elements of their personalities and various social identities in ways that best suit them.

### **Action Research: How Should We Teach about SOTL in the Classroom?**

After reviewing the literature related to teaching SOTL in EFL/ESL classes, three things became apparent. First, interest in teaching SOTL in EFL/ESL classes is growing (see Mercury, 1995; Horan, 2013; Holster, 2005; Liyanage et al., 2015; Finn, 2017). Second, a knowledge gap exists between native English speakers and non-native speakers in relation to understanding and using SOTL (Dewaele, 2007; Dewaele, 2018). And third, presently there is a lack of research-based guidelines for teachers to draw from in regards to teaching about SOTL in EFL/ESL classrooms.

The following action research was done in an attempt to address both the second and third observations.

### **Study Overview**

Taking an action research approach (for an overview, see Burns, 2005), which incorporated informal group interviews and Likert scale surveys, this study aimed to develop an effective and professional way to teach adult EFL students about SOTL. The study was undertaken in early 2019 in the hopes of uncovering an effective approach, or at the very least, developing a range of thinking points teachers could consider if and when they decide to teach about SOTL in their classes.

### **Inclusion Criteria**

To be included in this study, the volunteer participants were required to have sufficient English ability to understand the topic (this was deemed to be a minimum IELTS score of 6 or a minimum TOEIC score of 600), be over 18 years old, consent to participate in a class addressing SOTL in English, and agree to complete both the pre-class and post-class surveys and the post-class interview aimed at eliciting constructive feedback related to the lessons’ content and pedagogical approach.

### *Participants*

Thirty-two adult Korean EFL students (1:1 ratio of males and females), who met the selection criteria mentioned above, were involved in this study. At the time of the study, the participants, all of whom were either university graduates ( $n = 23$ ) or current university students ( $n = 9$ ), were aged from 19 to 57 ( $M = 31.5$ ), were voluntarily studying English twice a week (for two hours per lesson) at a private language school for their own personal reasons.

Six of the 32 students had previously lived abroad. Of the remaining 26 students, seven had aspirations of living in an English-speaking country, while the other 19 stated they only needed English for business purposes, to make travel easier, and/or to consume English media.

### *Methods*

For this research, I conducted four separate two-hour classes specifically aimed at teaching the students *about* SOTL (i.e., the class was aimed at awareness raising and focused on the forms, functions, history, and cultural aspects of SOTL).

Each of the two-hour classes involved eight students (4 male and 4 female), all of whom had volunteered to enroll in one of the classes after seeing an information poster related to the study displayed at their private English academy.

As stated, the goal of the research project was to develop a method of teaching about SOTL in a non-offensive, non-threatening, professional and pedagogically sound manner. Due to this, surveys were filled out by each participant before and after each class to ascertain their thoughts and reactions to the class. In addition, I conducted short (approximately 15 minutes) informal group discussions immediately after the class to get the students' opinions, feedback, and suggestions on the lesson while their ideas were still at the forefront of their minds.

This approach was taken to ensure the voices of the participants were heard, to address any concerns they may have had, and to allow me to potentially implement any suggestions put forward by the participants in an attempt to develop a sound approach to teaching about SOTL in a classroom setting.

Since this research project intended to test various methods of instruction in the pursuit of developing a tenable approach to teaching about SOTL, a range of the suggestions and insights offered by the participants in relation to methodology and class content were

implemented in the subsequent class(es) to test for both suitability and practicality in a classroom environment.

By repeating this process four times, with four different groups of participants (four classes with eight participants per class), I not only garnered a range of strategies and ideas which could potentially make teaching about SOTL less stressful for all involved, but also implement and test different teaching strategies on a broader range of students to help ensure the findings of this research are applicable to teachers and students in other contexts.

### *Key Findings and Discussion*

#### **The five key findings are as follows:**

1. All but four of the participants believed learning about SOTL was beneficial. The reasons given included being able to communicate better, being able to understand social situations better, and being able to understand media and humor better.

2. Results from the Likert surveys showed 11 participants (nine female and two male) felt “*uncomfortable*” ( $n = 8$ ) or “*very uncomfortable*” ( $n = 3$ ) during certain sections of the class. Interestingly, although these participants stated they felt uncomfortable, only two participants rated the class as a whole as “*a little offensive/confronting*.”

It should be noted that follow-up interviews revealed that the most problematic area for the participants was related to vocabulary associated with sex and genitalia.

3. The majority of participants either “*agreed*” ( $n = 12$ ) or “*strongly agreed*” ( $n = 18$ ) with the statement “*The class was enjoyable.*” Interestingly, all participants in the final group stated that they “*strongly enjoyed the class.*”

4. When asked to rate how confronting or offensive the class was as a whole, only two participants rated the class to be “*a little offensive/confronting*,” while the majority of the participants rated the class as either “*not really offensive/confronting*” ( $n = 17$ ) or “*not offensive/confronting at all*” ( $n = 13$ ).

5. Surveys revealed that every participant who had either lived in an English-speaking country or had the desire to live in an English-speaking country “*strongly agreed*” that SOTL should be taught in EFL classes. Upon further

investigation, it was revealed that all of these participants believed SOTL was common in English-speaking countries, and as such, they should learn more about it.

The results from this study show that although the subject of SOTL entails discussing a range of potentially offensive, upsetting, and sensitive topics, the majority of students involved in this study did not find the content offensive or confronting. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority believed that learning about SOTL was of benefit to them.

In terms of teaching SOTL related to body parts (i.e., genitalia) and sex, several of the participants suggested that female teachers should address these subject matters with female students and male teachers with male students.

In addition, although a number of participants stated they felt uncomfortable at times, this uncomfortable feeling was arguably mitigated by both the approach taken in the class (i.e., teaching *about* SOTL), and the willingness of the participants to take part in the class (knowing they could leave the class at any time).

This study also suggested that setting the scene with some interesting facts and history of swearing and taboo language, coupled with providing real life examples from a variety of different sources, can help put the participants at ease with the subject matter of the class.

Finally, it should be reiterated that the lessons discussed in this paper were not aimed at teaching students *how* to swear or use taboo language in English, instead, they were aimed at teaching the participants *about* SOTL in English (i.e., the class covered the forms, functions, history, communicative, and cultural aspects of SOTL). This approach was taken because I believed it would assist the participants to garner a deeper understanding of this style of language. In addition, I believe that this style of instruction allows the student to make a more informed decision on whether or not they would like to get extra instruction on *how* to use SOTL for whatever purpose they see fit (an assertion which was confirmed by the number of participants ( $n = 27$ ) who stated they wanted to learn *how* to use SOTL in English).

### **Guidelines for Teaching *about* SOTL in EFL/ESL Classes**

Although the following list of guidelines were developed based on feedback and input from 32 EFL students, it is worth reiterating that each learning context has its own unique set of challenges that need to be addressed before teaching such a sensitive topic, and as such, the following guidelines should be taken as a suggested guide.



## **Guidelines for consideration**

*Guideline 1:* It is advisable to not only make the class itself an elective class, but to also make each individual section/topic of the class elective.

*Guideline 2:* By its very nature, SOTL is a rather sensitive subject matter. For this reason, I suggest allowing the students the opportunity to choose whether they wish to be instructed by a female or male teacher (My data suggests that female students would prefer to be taught by female teachers.).

*Guideline 3:* Introducing the topic of SOTL seemed to work best when I prefaced the class with some historical background and interesting facts about SOTL. This approach seemed to intrigue the students and eased the tension in the room.

*Guideline 4:* Building on from guideline three, I found that using prominent examples of SOTL from literature (e.g., Shakespeare, the Bible), movies, and celebrities (e.g., Bono's expletive during the 2003 Golden Globe Awards) had a positive effect on the classroom environment.

*Guideline 5:* Since various elements of SOTL vary in intensity, it is advisable to explain how different lexical items have different degrees of “power” or “impact.” From this starting point, I found it easy to lead into a discussion on appropriacy, pragmatic functions, and the unwritten rules of SOTL which govern the *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, and *why* of SOTL use.

*Guideline 6:* The grammar rules of SOTL can be rather intricate; thus, it is important to explain how certain rules that can be found within SOTL may not exist in “standard” English (e.g., the infix – *‘fan-fucking-tastic’*). From a personal experience, I found it beneficial to juxtapose SOTL with more formal English as a way of further highlighting the emotional power and force certain lexical items and grammatical structures have.

*Guideline 7:* The study of SOTL can help students develop a better understanding of implicature and relevance. In my study, I found that using newspaper headlines and certain jokes incited the students to think more deeply about the intended meaning of the text or utterance, thus showing them how SOTL can be used for humor, irony, and innuendo.

## Conclusion

This article began by providing four core arguments as to why teaching about SOTL should be incorporated into EFL/ESL curriculums for adult students. Although not an exhaustive list, the arguments presented in this article address both the concerns of the teacher (e.g., having a professional and pedagogically sound approach aimed at meeting the needs of the students) and those of the students (e.g., being able to display their personalities or social identities more accurately and being able to close the knowledge-power gap in relation to SOTL).

The second section of this article outlined five of the key findings uncovered during a research project investigating how to teach about SOTL in an EFL context. Here it was found that not only do adult students in South Korea think that learning about SOTL is important, they also believe that this feature of language should be taught in EFL classes.

In addition, the overwhelming majority of participants involved in this study did not find the class as a whole to be offensive or confronting; however, 11 of the participants did report that certain sections of the class were more sensitive or confronting than other sections, with the most problematic areas being lexical items and discussions related to sex and genitalia.

Using participant feedback and data elicited from the study to develop in-class teaching protocols and methods for teaching about SOTL, I concluded this article by outlining 7 points teachers should consider when planning their curriculums and classes aimed at addressing SOTL in English.

Far from attempting to provide the perfect methodology for teaching about SOTL, this article's sole intention was to begin the conversation (a conversation which is greatly lacking in the literature) on how teachers can go about broaching the topic of SOTL in their classes in a non-offensive, non-threatening, professional and pedagogically sound manner.

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## Appendix A

### Swearing, Offensive, and Taboo Language in English.

#### Pre-class Survey

The following 5 statements relate to the topic of learning swearing, offensive, and taboo language in English. Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with these statements.

1 = Strongly disagree / 2 = Disagree / 3 = Neutral / 4 = Agree / 5 = Strongly agree

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
I am interested in learning <i>about</i> SOTL in English.					
I would like to learn <i>how</i> to use SOTL in English.					
I think SOTL should be included in English classes					

I think learning about SOTL in English would be beneficial.					
I can understand SOTL in English.					

### Post-class Survey

The following 5 statements relate to the class you have just participated in. Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with these statements.

1 = Strongly disagree / 2 = Disagree / 3 = Neutral / 4 = Agree / 5 = Strongly agree

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
The class was enjoyable.					
The class was educational.					
I would like to learn <i>how</i> to use SOTL in English.					
I think SOTL should be taught in EFL classes.					
I understand more about SOTL.					

The following 3 statements relate to the class you have just participated in. Please rate your emotional response or reaction to the class.

1 = Very / 2 = A little = / 3 = Neutral / 4 = Not really / 5 = Not at all

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
I found sections of class offensive/confronting.					
The class as a whole was offensive/confronting.					
I felt upset or uncomfortable during parts of the class.					

### Appendix B

#### Swearing, Offensive, and Taboo Language in English: Lesson Overview

Note: The lesson plan below is based on the final iteration of the class.

Sections	Points Addressed
Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Introduce the topic and explain what the class will cover and remind students that they can leave the class at any time without penalty or fear of being judged.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discuss when and where SOTL is used in the L1 and juxtapose this with English usage.</li> <li>• Discuss and explain the different vocabulary often used to refer to SOTL (e.g., foul language, bad language, swearing, profanity, slurs, epithets, expletives, four-letter words, cursing, cussing).</li> </ul>
Fun Facts and History	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide prominent examples from a range of sources to show how frequently taboo language is used (e.g., Shakespeare, the Bible, poetry, public figures, book titles, song lyrics, newspaper headlines, advertising).</li> <li>• Dispel some common myths related to SOTL (e.g., poverty of vocabulary myth) and provide some fun facts (e.g., swearing increases pain tolerance and strength)</li> <li>• Discuss how SOTL has been censured (e.g., George Carlin’s “7 Dirty Words”) and censored (e.g., Lady Chatterley’s Lover).</li> <li>• Provide an overview of how certain words were not always considered taboo (e.g., <i>fuck</i>, <i>shit</i>).</li> </ul>
Where SOTL Comes From	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide students with an overview of the sources of SOTL in English (e.g., animals, body parts, sex, sexuality, scatology, race, religion, mental illness, bodily functions) and give an overview of how different lexical items have different levels of intensity or offensiveness.</li> <li>• Explain that a given word in one form of English (e.g., British English) may have a very different meaning (or not exist) in another form of English (e.g., American or Australian English)</li> </ul>
SOTL Uses and Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explain how SOTL has several functions: Cathartic, Social, Abusive, Expletive, Idiomatic</li> <li>• Compare and contrast with Korean SOTL usage (e.g., while driving, if you bang your thumb with a hammer, if someone steals from you).</li> <li>• Use newspaper headlines, jokes, video clips, and other realia to help students understand implicature, humor, and relevance.</li> </ul>
The Grammar of SOTL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highlight how certain swearwords can be used to fit almost any grammatical purpose (e.g., <i>fuck</i>, <i>shit</i>).</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Highlight how grammar mistakes, such as using the wrong article (e.g., “He is <i>the shit.</i>” vs. “He is <i>a shit.</i>”), could change the meaning completely.</li><li>• Introduce idiomatic expressions (e.g., Hell yeah!)</li><li>• Juxtapose formal grammar and the grammar of SOTL.</li></ul>
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### **Author**

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