

# DAGNABIT! IT'S TIME TO TEACH SWEARING IN ESL CLASSROOMS

**RYAN KADUCE**  
**NICOLE METZGER**

*University of Iowa*

## ABSTRACT

*It is time to talk about the elephant in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. Our students are surrounded by all registers of English in their daily interactions, and a major part of our job is to prepare them to function within these interactions to the best of their abilities. However, there is a significant aspect of language use that instructors tend to neglect: swearing. Research suggests that the typical stance of avoidance is actually doing ESL students a great disservice (Lyanage et al., 2015; Horan, 2013). This article has two objectives: to discuss and expand on literature around swearing in the ESL community and to introduce a swearing pilot unit that was implemented in intensive English program (IEP) classrooms. The goal is to help open the door to this complex and ubiquitous facet of English for the benefit of ESL students.*

## INTRODUCTION

The entirety of the ESL teaching community can agree that an authentic English language learning experience must include language applicable to situations both in and out of an academic context. With this in mind, many American institutions emphasize U.S. culture as one of the core elements of ESL program curricula. However, there is an aspect of culture intimately tied to a significant and ubiquitous segment of the language that ESL professionals typically avoid: the cultural expectations and situational appropriacy of swearing in English.

If we wish to provide our students with fully authentic language in the ESL classroom, we must embrace frank discussions about the use of swearing and other forms of taboo language. We must also strive to provide safe, nonjudgmental spaces for English language learners (ELLs) to practice and better understand the appropriate use of and situational motivation for swearing.

However, the “sanctuary of the classroom” (i.e. the idea of the classroom as a serious, academic environment where swearing simply feels wrong) tends to preclude the acquisition of this rather ubiquitous aspect of the language and leaves ELLs without the benefits of formal classroom instruction (Rösler, 2000).

## **BACKGROUND**

Let us take a moment to examine the reality of swearing for both native and non-native speakers of English. There is a rather persistent myth that frequent use of swearing is an indication of low intelligence and/or a limited vocabulary. However, the reality is that an abundance of swearing in one's speech is not typically perceived by others to be negative (Jay & Jay, 2015). In fact, the use of swearing can be beneficial if one is proficient enough in its usage. For someone who is fully aware of the conventions and emotional force of swearing, swearing can actually help to relieve negative emotions (Jay, 2009).

To become such proficient users of swearing, native speakers of English typically have their entire childhood to piece together the elements of the language that actually constitute swearing, and they are able to learn about the emotional force and taboo nature of swearing via specific, explicit feedback from their elders (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). When native speakers of English reach school age, they already have a basic knowledge of adult swearing (Jay & Jay, 2013; Andersson & Trudgill, 1990).

In contrast, ELLs do not typically have the ability to access the feedback readily available to native English-speaking children. This results in a lack of knowledge of the emotional force of swearing and limited perception of this force, which tends to be linked to the age of onset of language learning (Dewaele, 2004). Additionally, knowledge of the conventions surrounding the

use of swearing is typically incomplete or inaccurate for ELLs. They may not be fully aware of how cultural differences in appropriacy may influence the use of swearing in their native language versus swearing in English in nearly identical contexts (Dewaele, 2016). Due to this general lack of understanding of culture-bound appropriacy, ELLs tend to report less frequent use of swearing than native speakers (Dewaele, 2010, 2013, 2016, 2017).

In terms of formal ESL classroom instruction, the most common approach to dealing with swearing is avoidance. Unless there is explicit use of swearing that an instructor chooses to engage, there exists what Liyanage et al. (2015) referred to as a “conscious neglect.” As a result, direct instruction and incorporation of swearing into a program’s curricula tend to be extremely rare. By neglecting the formal instruction of swearing, instructors are pushing an extremely difficult element of socialization onto the shoulders of their students rather than taking time in the classroom to foster meaningful discussions and provide authentic learning opportunities.

It may be argued that this neglect does ELLs a great disservice based on evidence presented in discourse analysis studies, which indicate that swearing in general is a significant part of a person’s ability to communicate (Horan, 2013; El-Okda, 2011; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Understanding the correct and acceptable use of swearing is important for communicating with peers based on the complex social constraints that dictate its usage. For example, international college-aged students studying abroad in the U.S. tend to show a great deal of interest in learning how to swear because they see it as a tool that can help them connect with their American peers (Horan, 2013). In addition to the positive social aspects linked to learning about swearing, non-native speakers also want to understand when someone is insulting them and when their improper use of swearing might insult someone else (Jay, 2000).

One must also consider that ELLs may be exposed to a great deal of swearing through song lyrics, movies, and other forms of media. This may give them the impression that Americans swear much more frequently and in a wider range of social contexts than they actually do. ELLs who believe that this prolific usage of swearing in media should be extrapolated to real-world interactions may experience communicative problems stemming from overuse. This could result in social rejection or even outright hostility depending on the context (Mercury, 1995).

On top of all of the complex social issues that may necessitate formal classroom instruction of swearing, it is also important to keep in mind the difficulty of the acquisition of swearing due to the fact that it does not seem to follow traditional grammatical or lexical rules. According to Napoli & Hoeksema (2009), swear words can be used in any English constituent. Additionally, they are pragmatically connected in that they add an element of intensity to an utterance. Usually, the enlistment of a lexeme is dependent on its category and features, which are partially ascribed to lexical semantics and are partially arbitrary. However, in swearing constructions, lexical meaning appears to play little to no role. In fact, some swear words spread together from one construction to another despite a lack of lexical or semantic connection. This seems to indicate that the intense or taboo pragmatic status of swear words is somehow recognized by the grammar (Napoli & Hoeksema, 2009). An implication of this is that even if a student is particularly gifted when it comes to the acquisition of grammatical structures, the nuances of swearing may remain elusive without some element of formal instruction.

All of these considerations justify a disruption of this conscious neglect through explicit formal instruction of swearing in ESL classrooms. As suggested by Lyanage et al. (2015),

language teacher education and professional development should move toward dispelling myths about the use of swearing, reexamining conventions of classroom appropriacy, and questioning whether we are truly fulfilling our obligations as language teachers by consciously neglecting an entire segment of the English language. These goals became the driving forces behind the development of a culture and communication skills-focused swearing unit with the purpose of equipping students with the tools they need to understand and use swearing correctly and in culturally appropriate contexts.

## **APPLICATION: PILOT UNIT**

With all of the above justifications in mind, a pilot unit was created to introduce swearing into an IEP classroom. The rest of this article will focus on this unit and its implementation in an advanced level IEP classroom and a modified version for an intermediate IEP classroom. A few considerations were kept in mind while designing this unit. The goal of this unit was not to simply give students a list of vocabulary words to memorize but rather create a comfortable environment to motivate students to be inquisitive about swearing. Once motivation was established, tools were introduced to help ESL students acquire knowledge concerning the definition and cultural use of curse words. The outcomes of the pilot unit were four distinct lesson plans that could be used individually or together over a course of a few class periods.

### **Part 1: General Knowledge**

The first part of this unit is aimed at cultivating curiosity about swearing in American culture while also establishing some guidelines for swearing as ESL students. At the beginning of class, students were assigned to small groups of three or four. They were then asked to have a discussion over their general knowledge about swearing, the discussion lasted about twenty

minutes for advanced ESL learners and ten minutes for intermediate learners. Critical thinking skills were encouraged by instructing students to focus their discussion on the culture of swearing rather than simply listing swear words that they knew. Instructors acted as moderators of the discussion by making sure the students stayed on task and focused on the following questions:

1. What do you know about swearing in English?
2. How do you learn swear words?
3. Do you have words that are equivalent to English swear words in your native language?
4. Why are swear words appealing to use?

After small group discussions, the instructor led a large classroom discussion over the questions listed above. The large classroom discussion encourages students to be engaged and share their opinions freely. Instructors were not corrective in responding to students' answers, as there were no right or wrong answers to the questions. Once instructors felt that the classroom discussion improved understanding, it was time to introduce the last section for lesson one.

The last section of this lesson established guidelines for ESL students before formal instruction began. This was the only time during the entire unit where the instructor stepped into a role of lecturer. The guidelines highlighted key areas of knowledge that students should attain during this unit. The four best practice ideas that were explained to the students by the instructors are listed below:

1. Swearing in language is natural but culture has made swearing taboo.
2. It is necessary to learn how to use swear words if ESL students wish to become proficient speakers. English is not only used to speak formally to a teacher or boss.
3. All ESL students need to be aware of certain swear words and how to use them appropriately. This includes the understanding of specific situations and contexts where

swearing is frequently used. It also includes how connotations can alter the definitions and use of swear words.

4. The most important piece of advice: As an ESL student, if you do not have a clear understanding of a word, *do not* use it when talking to someone you do not know.

This concluded the first lesson, after which students left the classroom feeling motivated and excited to learn more about swearing.

## **Part 2: An Introduction to English Swearing**

The second part of this unit focused on introducing swearing in English, specifically culture differences and particularities of swearing in America. The first activity of this lesson had the students watch a short video titled, *Ass Is the Most Complicated Word in The English Language*. The video is a short comedy sketch by an English L2 learner, who describes his hardships with learning the word 'ass' and all of its plentiful uses in the English language (Ismo, 2018). While watching the video, students were asked to take notes and list any moment 'ass' was used in a new context. The advanced ESL students only needed to watch the video once for full understanding while the intermediate students watched the video twice with a guided discussion. After the video, students were once again asked to form small groups and answer the following comprehension and discussion questions related to the video:

1. What are the different ways the comedian uses 'ass?'
2. Can we group these uses of 'ass' into different categories?
3. What does the video tell us about connotation in swearing?
  - a. What is the difference between connotations and definitions?
4. Do you know any other English swear words that work like 'ass?'
  - a. Do you know any swear words in your native language that can be used like 'ass?'

Once all of the small groups had time to answer all of these questions, between fifteen and twenty minutes for each class, instructors led a large classroom discussion expanding on the questions. The goal of this discussion was to have a clear understanding of how 'ass' can be used in a variety of different semantic and syntactic contexts. The instructors also emphasized how these examples are a common occurrence when it comes to all swearing in English. At the end of this second lesson students were eager to learn about specific swear words. They all felt confident that they were beginning to understand the complexities within English swearing, and students were eager to begin the next lesson.

### **Part 3: Demonstrate Your Knowledge**

This lesson really allowed the students free reign to explore their own knowledge and use the skills that they had been developing in the prior lessons. This activity works the best when students are in small groups, but this activity will also work if they are in pairs or larger groups of five or more students. Students were given a handout with a chart, which had three columns: swear word, definition, and sentence. Students were asked to list as many English swear words as they knew, give a definition of that word, and finally write a sentence using correct context. In the advanced class, the students were asked to avoid using their phones for the first half of the activity. Then for the second half of class, they were able to use their phones. Phones were allowed to be used for the entire duration in the intermediate class. Students were given at least thirty minutes to complete this activity. Instructors walked around and monitored the students during the activity; feedback was given if necessary either to a specific group or to the whole class. It is imperative to note that instructors were not helping students by merely giving them lists of swear words to research or use. Instead, instructors monitored the contexts that students



were attempting to use with the chosen swear words. If the context of a word was being used in an egregious manner then it was appropriate for an instructor to intervene to correct the mistake.

If time permitted at the end of the lesson, there were multiple ways instructors could extend the activity. Instructors could engage in a large classroom discussion by having each group share some of the words the students chose to include in their charts. Additionally, instructors could pick some of the most common words that the students included on their charts and discuss those specific words in class. This approach could address why some swear words are more common than others and the different connotations that are associated with these words. The final activity would ask the students to fill out another chart. This chart would have the students consider situations in American culture where one might hear or use that word including: used on TV; used with friends; used with friends, acquaintances, and maybe (some) professors; and finally, words one should never use because the word's definition and connotation are too negative in American culture. The end of this lesson had students feeling more confident in their knowledge, so it was time for them to begin practicing swearing in specific situations.

#### **Part 4: Role Playing Activities**

The final lesson of this unit involved two main components: discussing certain situations where it is appropriate to swear in American culture, and finally, having students practice their knowledge of swearing by creating their own sentences and scenes that involve the accurate use of a swear word. Two different role-playing activities were used in the classroom.

The first activity was a guided role-play. This was the sole activity used in the intermediate IEP class for this part of the unit, while this first activity and the second activity,

discussed later, were used in the advanced IEP class. The first part of both activities introduced specific situations where swearing is considered appropriate: injuries, upset or frustration, road rage, extreme happiness, and stress (e.g. "You are building a table for one of your engineering classes. While you are working, you accidentally drop a hammer onto your foot. You think you broke a toe. What would you say?"). Then students were split up into partners and were given specific scenes where a swear word would be an appropriate response. There were twenty written scenes total, and each group received two or three scenes. Then students were asked to fill out a table where they answered five questions:

1. What swear word or phrase will you choose?
2. What do *you* think is the definition of this word or phrase? (Do *not* use a dictionary.)
3. Why did you choose this word or phrase? Be specific.
4. Use this word or phrase in a sentence or two to respond to your scene.
5. Are there any other swear words or phrases that would also work for this scene?

Please list them below.

Students were given between fifteen and twenty minutes to complete this activity. The instructor monitored the students' progression and offered advice if a group was using a word incorrectly. Many students asked to use a phrase containing more than one swear word to respond to their situation. If the phrase was grammatically and semantically correct, they were encouraged to use it. At the end of this activity, if time permitted, students would share their favorite scene and response to the whole class.

The second activity, a creative role-play, worked much better in an advanced level IEP classroom as it allowed the students to be really thoughtful and creative in their work. This activity was similar to this first activity, but modified in two ways. First, the students were not given specific scenes to respond to; instead, students were given a specific emotion or experience

to create a scene: injured, upset, experiencing road rage, extremely happy, or stressed out.

Second, the students completed a slightly altered prompt that included a dialogue.

Example: You are injured.

1. Create your scene. How did you get injured? Be specific.
2. What swear word or phrase will you choose?
3. What do *you* think is the definition of this word or phrase? (Do *not* use a dictionary.)
4. Why did you choose this word or phrase? Be specific.
5. Write at least an 8-sentence dialogue with your partner.

This activity took the entire class since it is possible to have the students create specific scenes for each appropriate emotion. The students had fun at the end of class describing one of their curated scenes and reactions in front of the entire class. At the end of these four lessons, students had the tools necessary to begin swearing outside of the classroom, as the pilot unit was successfully completed.

## CONCLUSION

Some final observations and conclusions about the overall effectiveness of the pilot should be noted for any instructors who are interested in bringing this unit into their own classrooms. The most positive reaction from the students was their motivation and eagerness to stay focused on the tasks that were being introduced. It was clear from the beginning that regardless of their English ability, ESL students wanted to learn how to swear in English. The students in the advanced IEP class were familiar with a lot of English swear words, but they were constantly misusing these words due to being unfamiliar with the words' connotations. While the students in the intermediate IEP class were familiar with some English swear words, many times they were interpreting words that are completely acceptable in most contexts as 'swearing.'

including words like *jerk*, *dork*, and *nerd*. Another consideration regarding this swearing unit is the appropriate level of proficiency for introducing this content. At the end of the pilot unit, the instructors agreed that an intermediate ESL class should be considered the optimal level for introduction. Even with limitations in vocabulary and listening skills, there is potential to prime students with basic introductory lessons about swearing to prepare them for more in-depth lessons in an advanced level course.

In conclusion, the implementation of these four lessons achieved the goal of fulfilling our obligation to move away from active avoidance of swearing in the classroom. This unit provides a safe, non-judgmental space for the acquisition of swearing via a discussion of background knowledge, an introduction to cultural elements of swearing, open-ended exploration of the language, and focused role-play practice activities. Students who have the opportunity to work through these lessons are arguably better equipped to use and understand this aspect of the language in a variety of contexts. A conscience and considerate effort by English language instructors to bring swearing into the classroom is crucial when working toward fully preparing ELLs for the English-speaking world around them.

## THE AUTHORS

*Ryan is a lecturer at the University of Iowa, where he has taught ESL courses for eight years. Before starting at his current position, Ryan taught EFL courses for a year in Cambodia and China. Although Ryan tends to gravitate toward the teaching of speaking and listening skills, he has experience teaching all language skills at every level of proficiency.*

*Nicole is an Instructional Services Specialist for the Department of World Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at the University of Iowa. Before this position, Nicole taught ESL courses for two years at the University of Iowa. Nicole is passionate about helping language instructors use the best tools and technology in their classrooms, especially where speaking and listening come into practice.*

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