Why do people use swearwords in spoken English?

Swearwords are part of taboo language and many people connect swearing with the intention to cause offence. However, the role of swearwords is much more complex than that. From the linguistic perspective, swearwords are usually defined as words that are used to express the speaker's emotional state and to communicate this information to the listener. While the emotion conveyed by swearwords is often that of anger or frustration, swearwords can also play a positive role in building of relationships and indicate to other people that they are accepted as friends. Since swearing is relatively common in spoken informal English, this worksheet seeks to help learners of English to interpret the use of swearwords in spoken communication. The tasks use data and examples from the British National Corpus 2014 to explore why people use swearwords, who uses swearwords and how frequent swearwords are in conversations.

Task 1

How frequent are swearwords? In this task, we look at how frequent swearing is in informal spoken English. Look at the following swearwords and place them on a scale from the least frequent (the blue end) to the most frequent (the red end). Underline the swearwords that you haven't encountered before; you can check their meaning in a dictionary and their use in BNClab using the Usage button.

<p align="center">arse – bitch – bloody – bullshit – cunt – damn – dickhead – fuck – fucking – piss off – shit</p>

Now go to BNClab and check whether your intuition was correct. Type the swearwords one by one, and use the Change button to find the frequency of each word in current English. Tip: Type the swearwords using capital letters to search for all forms of the word (e.g. *damn, damned*). Discuss the following questions:

- Was your intuition correct?
- What factors may affect how frequent a certain swearword is?
- Looking at the frequency of the swearwords in the corpus, how common is swearing in spoken British English? Do you think it is a common feature of informal conversations?

Task 2

Who uses swearwords? It is sometimes believed that swearwords are used predominately by certain groups of people, for example, by men rather than women, and by people from the working class rather than students and people from the middle class. In this activity, we are going to check these hypotheses. Look up the following swearwords in BNClab and note down which groups in terms of age, gender and social class use them most.

	GENDER	AGE	SOCIAL CLASS
bullshit	*e.g. Women slightly more than men*	*Mostly younger people*	*Mostly students & middle class*
bloody			
dickhead			
fucking			
shit			

Task 3

Why do people use swearwords? Although people often believe that swearwords are mostly used to express negative emotions, there are many different reasons for using swearwords. Look at the examples below, taken from the conversations of British English speakers in the BNC 2014, and decide:

- What is the purpose of the swearwords in these sentences?
- Do the swearwords help to express a positive or a negative emotion?

1. S1: and he was like here it is I was like no S2: is it this one? is it this one? S1: here it is right on the map you **fucking arsehole** S2: yeah S1: anyway it cost me thirty zloty to make a ten minute journey

2. S1: don't have an answerphone yet S2: yeah yeah S1: and I pick it up and all I was getting was this **bloody beeping noise** S2: yeah yeah S1: and I ended up having to unplug the phone every night and it was so annoying

3. S1: I really wish I had some chocolate or something S2: do you want one? oh okay S1: not as in dessert S2: oh and chocolate? S1: **oh shit** I keep forgetting about the chocolate S2: mm S1: I might have some later

4. S: and it's annoying okay erm god my eyesight is just **fucking awful** I can't even read this far away can you read it from that far away like? can you read what's on that thing?

5. S1: That's what I thought's like visiting why the fuck did you say you were free then? **You fucking idiot,** he's not free at all because tomorrow S2: he's at work ain't he?

6. S: cos my mum left when I was six and I think that you know upset my relationships and how I was generally erm and I thought it was **bloody brilliant** and I sort of came out of that experience thinking my god everybody should have counselling

7. S1: I hate that fucking record! S2: It's sick! S1: What's wrong with that? It goes on and on and on!! Bitch! The last dog in! S1: She looks like **a stupid bitch** too S2: She is! Stupid bitch! Did you go out last night? S1: No

8. S1: and we made burnt burnt erm burnt like burnt chilli salsa didn't we? burnt salsa S2: yeah S1: is **fucking awesome** it makes it it makes it taste of Mexican immediately

Task 4

How to talk politely about swearwords: In English, some of the most common or offensive swearwords can be referred to in an indirect way. Type in the following expressions in BNClab. Use the Usage button to see in what context the expression has been used. (Tip: Increase the context size to 100 words). Can you guess from the context which swearwords these expressions refer to?

C word _____

F word _____

S word _____