

## Do we need resources for teaching about swearing in English language classes?

It is probably fair to say that *swearing* is not among the most common topics in English language classrooms; in fact, it hardly ever appears in textbooks or on the language curriculum. Yet this is perhaps somewhat strange given how common swearwords are in spoken (British) English and given their importance when it comes to interpreting the linguistic and social messages they help to convey.

Without a doubt, the frequency and ubiquity of swearwords in spoken British English makes them an important component of language use, with implications for learners' ability to understand communication around them. Especially if coming from linguistic and cultural backgrounds with different attitudes to taboo language, it may be difficult for learners to interpret, linguistically and socially, the role and impact of swearwords in the language they encounter. There are various reasons for swearing and it is important for learners of English to be aware of the different functions that swearwords fulfil in conversations and to be able to distinguish between the potentially more offensive and dangerous uses of swearwords on the one hand and the more light-hearted and friendly use of taboo language on the other hand. It is crucial for learners to be able to determine whether the swearwords are directed at them or not and whether they are intended to offend. As Finn (2017, p. 20-21) emphasises, "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." Thus, while the use of taboo language is, understandably, a sensitive topic and talking about swearwords is not suitable for every classroom and every group of learners, there should be teaching materials available on the topic.

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### 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, indicating to other people that they are accepted as friends. Swearwords are relatively common in spoken informal English. This worksheet therefore aims 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 BNCweb using the Usage button.

arse - bitch - bloody - bollocks - ballsit - cunt - damn - dickhead - fuck - fucking - piss off - shit



Now go to BNCweb 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 middle classes. In this activity, we are going to check these hypotheses. Look up the following swearwords in BNCweb and note down which groups in terms of age, gender and social class use them most.

	GENDER	AGE	SOCIAL CLASS
bullshit	<u>e.g. Women slightly more than men</u>	<u>Mostly younger people</u>	<u>Mostly students &amp; middle class</u>
bloody	_____	_____	_____
dickhead	_____	_____	_____
fucking	_____	_____	_____
shit	_____	_____	_____

Therefore, Corpus for Schools decided to offer teaching resources that address this topic. The main reason for creating these teaching materials, that deal with the use of swearwords in spoken English, is to help English learners to understand the language and society around them. These materials seek to empower the learners by giving them a better understanding of how and why swearwords are used and in what situations they may encounter them. This will help to prepare them to navigate interaction that may involve swearwords. The intention behind these teaching materials and the learning aims that guide them are thus different from other materials on this website which both seek to raise learners' awareness of patterns in language use and frequency of the swearwords in the corpus, how common is swearing in spoken British English speakers. The materials dealing with swearwords are not intended to encourage students to incorporate swearwords into their lexicon and, as a result, do not include tasks that would involve practicing swearwords by the learners. Instead, the focus is on the tasks that help students interpret the meaning of swearwords in the communication of British English speakers.

So, these teaching materials do come with a warning – the worksheets contain taboo language and while doing the tasks, learners would be asked to search the corpus for examples of swearwords and discuss their findings. This is not something that is suitable for every class and each teacher has to consider the advantages and potential issues with using the material with their students. But as long as there are some teachers and learners interested in finding out more about this feature of spoken English and are comfortable with teaching about swearing as one of components of language, there should also be materials that they can use in discussing the topic with their students.

## References

Finn, E. (2017). Swearing: The Good, the Bad & the Ugly. *ORTESOL Journal*, 34, 17-26.