Swearing and How to Deal with it in the Classroom

Fiona Elizabeth Oliver

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Fiona Elizabeth Oliver
280779-2619

University of Iceland
School of Education
Education Studies, International Studies in Education
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Advisor: Robert Berman
Abstract

Swearing is a phenomenon that has been overlooked in EFL/ESL classrooms in Iceland and little has been published on the subject. EFL teachers should help pupils learn the use of appropriate language in the appropriate context. This study aimed to investigate teachers’ attitudes and approaches to teaching about swearing and appropriate language use in EFL classrooms in Iceland. In this research paper I examined the sociolinguistics of swearing by discussing taboo language, recalling taboo language and exploring the relationship between language and culture.

Key words: Swearing, appropriate language, taboo, culture, EFL.
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1. Introduction

English has a very interesting role and status in Iceland. The title Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir uses in one of her articles “English in Iceland: Second Language, Foreign Language, or Neither?” I feel reflects the status of English in Iceland today. The status of English is being redefined due to the wide use and exposure of the language; it now has as Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir and Hafðís Ingvarsdóttir (2007) point out, “more in common with a second language situation than a traditional foreign language context”. The transforming status and exposure to English has led to it influencing the Icelandic language. Swearing is a part of everyday language use in English and Icelandic but somehow English swear words have become part of daily Icelandic language and use. Because of the high exposure to English, Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir and Hafðís Ingvarsdóttir (2007) argue that “it may be appropriate to critically re-evaluate …the nature and goals of English language instruction from pre-school to tertiary education as a whole” (p. 54).

During an observation of an EFL classroom in Iceland in the spring of 2010 I began wondering about the importance of teaching EFL learners appropriate language use in the appropriate context. While I was not surprised by the amount of swear words the students knew, I was startled that they were using such language in the classroom. This would never have been acceptable in my homeland, Canada. There is a popular video called Want to learn English? This is an advertisement for English lessons, on the website YouTube. In the video a family of four foreigners (two adults and two children) starts up their vehicle. On the radio a catchy tune with very offensive English lyrics is playing. The family looks at one another and begin to joyfully bob their heads to the song. This clip demonstrates there is a need for foreigners to learn the appropriate use of language in the appropriate context.

On another occasion my six year old son came home from playing outside and asked me: “Mamma, what does fucking bitch mean?” I was shocked. I could not believe those words had come out of my beautiful baby’s mouth. A seven year old boy had said this while playing. I was not sure if I should laugh or threaten to wash his mouth out with soap, if I should discuss this openly with him or ignore it. This incident made me question my attitude towards swear words and my approach to teaching about them. If I was not sure how to teach my son about swear words and appropriate language use in certain contexts, what was I going to do as an EFL teacher?
Are English teachers in Iceland responsible for teaching students appropriate language usage in the appropriate context when it comes to swearing? There is very little information on this subject and I believe it is because as Wajnryb (2005, p.4) notes “the taboo overlying the language of swearing has so stigmatized the subject that academics are hesitant to soil their hands even by association”. I am ready and willing to get a little dirt on my hands if it helps me figure out what my pedagogical responsibilities are as a future EFL teacher. In this research paper I will be examining swearing which includes taboo language, recalling taboo language and explore the relationship between language and culture. Finally, I have collected qualitative data from EFL teachers and classrooms in Iceland in order to answer the question: What is swearing and how should we teach about swearing and appropriate language use in EFL classrooms in Iceland?

2. Method

I begin this research by examining swearing in a cultural context and exploring what others have written on this topic. Next, I investigate EFL teachers’ attitudes and approaches towards teaching about swearing in their classrooms in Iceland through the use of observations and interviews.

3. Sociolinguistic Analysis of Swearing

I found it very interesting while researching this topic that very little has been published on swearing in EFL classes especially since swearing is a linguistic universal. Communicative competence is what most language learners strive for; therefore lessons that focus on taboo language, how to use it and in what context could be beneficial to learners.

3.1 Taboo Language

A taboo is defined by the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary as: “a cultural or religious custom that does not allow people to do, use or talk about a particular thing as people find it offensive or embarrassing.” Although words like fuck and shit are considered taboo they are some of the most commonly used words in English (Fairman, 2006; Mercury, 1995). In
Western society, taboo words are usually related to words for sex, sex organs and excrement. Jay (2009) asserts “Taboo words are defined and sanctioned by institutions of power”.

We keep the taboo alive by instilling it in our children. Children do not realize which words are “bad” or inappropriate until they have said them and get a negative reaction from the adults. Thus, we are reinforcing the taboo with this behaviour. Shame is usually attached to the use of “bad” language and some form of punishment. Some people think swearing, as Wajnryb (2005 p. 8) suggests, “makes you look bad; it’s a social ill; and it corrupts the language”. But swearing is like an emotional release, people tend to feel better after they have said it; it feels like you are getting something off of your chest.

Jay (2009) believes that “The ultimate offensiveness of words is determined entirely by pragmatic variables such as speaker–listener relationship and social–physical setting, as well as the words used and tone of voice”. Swearing in itself may not be impolite if it is used within the boundaries of what is regarded as situationally appropriate (Jay, T., Janschewitz, K. 2008, p. 268). Hence, successful swearers (i.e., those who do not offend their listeners) use taboo language in accordance to the situation they are speaking in (Mercury, 1995, p. 33). The use of the word fuck and/or any of its variants may be appropriate in certain contexts (like a bar) but not in others (like the principal’s office or your grandmother’s house). Some people may find certain words more offensive than others because they attack their belief system or something which they feel is degrading. Jay (2009) emphasises this point by saying “Young boys find words such as baby or wimp more offensive than do their parents. The chore for the language learner is to determine what words are appropriate for a given social setting”.

This is what language teachers need to point out. According to Fairman (2006, p. 5) “Fuck is a taboo word…However, refraining from the use of fuck only reinforces the taboo”. In Fairman’s (2006, p. 21) opinion “…teachers who avoid using shocking words in the classroom when the topic involves speech certainly perpetuate taboo, as well as shirk their pedagogical responsibilities”. EFL speakers should be made aware that native English speakers usually swear in context specific situations (Mercury, 1995, p. 33). Fluent speakers of English should have a broader knowledge of what could be interpreted as polite or impolite language.

In French speaking Canada, Quebec, where I am from, the swear words are all related to the church. They are tabarnac (tabernacle), maudit (damn), câlice (chalice), crisse (Christ) and
ostie (host) to name a few. People swear about things that are taboo, because they want to attack that which represses them (religionnewsblog.com, 2006). In most English speaking countries, that has to do with sex, whereas in Quebec it is related to the church because Quebecers were repressed by the Catholic Church for such a long time. Dewaele (2004) explains that “An expression like hostie de voisin (damn neighbour) would be considered forceful in Quebec but meaningless in France where the expression salaud de voisin would be a better formulation of the communicative intention to negatively describe one’s neighbour”. I feel this is a good demonstration of the link between language, culture and taboo. Just because people speak the same language does not necessarily mean the same words will prove to be offensive. Another interesting characteristic about French swear words is that they can be modified so they can be used in more places with a more varied audience without offending. “The sacramental wafer, a ‘host’ in English and ‘hostie’ in French, can be watered down to just the sound ‘sst’ in polite company. ‘Tabernacle’ can become just ‘tabar’ to avoid too much offense” (religionnewsblog.com, 2006). Andre Lapierre is a professor of linguistics at the University of Ottawa claims he teaches these words in his class because “these oaths are so ingrained that one cannot converse fluently without them” (religionnewsblog.com, 2006).

Icelandic swear words tend to fall into the same category as French Canadian swear words: under religion. The most offensive words in Icelandic have to do with hell and the devil, such as andskotinn, helvíttis and djöfullinn. My husband has a middle-aged Icelandic uncle who only swears in Icelandic, and one of his infamous sayings is “helvíttis heitasta helvíti” which is very offensive.

3.2 Recalling Taboo Words

Jay and Janschewitz (2008, p. 270) reveal “Enhanced amygdala activity (a neurophysiological marker of arousal) is found during initial processing of taboo words, and is associated with enhanced attention and superior memory for taboo words”. Most of us have experience with this. I spent numerous hours trying to help my son build his vocabulary; it took him a while to acquire the word “ball”, but I stub my toe and yell out “shit” and he grasps that word instantly. He repeated that word often and practiced saying it with different intonations and of course preferred to use it where I thought it was most inappropriate. Another example is when visiting a new country one usually tries to pick up a
few words in that language and the words most easily remembered are usually swear words. Swear words and taboo words are often the first words learned in a L2; however they rarely appear in textbooks or in classroom discourse because of their offensive nature (Dewaele, J.-M., 2004). According to Jay, Caldwell-Harris and King (2008, p. 84), “Emotionally arousing words are remembered better than nonarousing words, and taboo words show the most exaggerated version of this effect”.

3.3 *Fuck*

There are not many words in the English language that are as versatile as the word *fuck*. In the words of McEnery and Xiao (2004, p. 236) “*Fuck* is perhaps ‘one of the most interesting and colourful words in the English language today’ that can be used to describe pain, pleasure, hatred and even love”. It is no longer exclusively a verb as it once was; it has evolved becoming more grammatically accommodating. *Fuck* can be a noun, an adjective, an adverb, a transitive and intransitive verb and as a part of a word such as: abso-*fucking-*lutely or in-*fucking-*credible. There is fugly which is *fuck* + ugly or *fuck* + retard which becomes *fucktard*. Table 1. Demonstrates the grammatical flexibility of the word *fuck*.

Adapted from: (Holster, D. 2005, p. 63)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>An <strong>intransitive</strong> verb.</th>
<th>John <em>fucked</em> Susan.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An <strong>intransitive</strong> verb.</td>
<td>John <em>fucks</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An <strong>adjective</strong>.</td>
<td>It’s so <em>fucking</em> cold.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As part of an <strong>adverb</strong>.</td>
<td>Susan complains too <em>fucking</em> much.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As an <strong>adverb</strong> intensifying an adjective.</td>
<td>Susan is <em>fucking</em> beautiful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a <strong>noun</strong>.</td>
<td>John doesn’t give a <em>fuck</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As an <strong>inflex</strong> (part of a word).</td>
<td>That’s out-<em>fucking</em>-standing!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1. The Grammar of Fuck**

*Fuck* can also have different meanings depending on the inflection used and who it is used with. It can be used affectionately, descriptively or nastily. It can also be used in a humorous fashion, as an expletive or an auxiliary. When swear words are used in a humorous fashion they are directed towards others but not in a derogatory way. They most often take an abusive form but are meant to be playful rather than hurtful or offensive (Holster, D. 2005, p. 62). Table 2. Illustrates the diverse functions of the word *fuck*.
Greetings
How the *fuck* are you?

Difficulty
I don’t *fucking* understand.

Fraud
I got *fucked* by the government.

Despair
*Fucked* again.

Dismay
Oh, *fuck* it!

Incompetence
He always *fucks* everything up.

Trouble
Well, I guess I’m *fucked* now.

Displeasure
What the *fuck* is going on?

Aggression
*Fuck* you!

Lost
Where the *fuck* are we?

Disgust
*Fuck* me.

Disbelief
Un*fucking* believable.

Confusion
What the *fuck*?

Retaliation
Up your *fucking* ass.

Table 2. The Functions of *Fuck*

There are several factors that influence the use of the word *fuck* and other swear words. Some of them are whether the language is written or spoken, gender of the speaker, age of the speaker, education level and location. Reasons for the difference within written and spoken language is most likely because written English is usually more formal than spoken English. The use of the word *fuck* is also more likely to be censored in published written work. As McEnery and Xiao (2004, p. 236) state “While it is not clear why people use *fuck* considerably more in speech than in writing, our speculation is that *fuck* occurs more frequently in informal rather than formal contexts”. Written language is permanent; it requires planning and can be edited. Spoken language on the other hand is not pre-planned and is more dynamic. Men swear more than women generally, perhaps since it is more socially accepted. In McEnery and Xiao’s (2004, p. 241) view “While it is not surprising that young people use *fuck* readily, children of the age group 0–14 appear to show an unexpectedly marked propensity to say *fuck* whereas people aged 35–44 demonstrate an unexpectedly low propensity”. Some of the motives for children to use swear words may be to rebel and/or act out and in addition to behave in a way they feel is more adult. According to Jay (2009) “Both speaker gender and age affect word choice and frequency”. When it
comes to education the belief and research both show that the more educated one is the less likely he or she is to use the word fuck or its variants (McEnery, A. Xiao, Z. 2004, p. 245).

**3.4 Language and Culture**

Holster (2005 p. 7) explains that “Language is a carrier of culture and understanding culture is integral to learning and understanding a language. Because language and culture are so inextricably related, it is not possible to understand or appreciate the one without knowledge of the other”.

We cannot assume that obscene words are unknown to many students when they can be commonly heard on the street in Reykjavik, on the radio, and in the movies. However, as Mercury (1995) acknowledges, “learners need to understand what constitutes obscene language…” and “why native speakers choose to use it, and what it signifies sociolinguistically”. Essentially, permitting discourse in EFL classrooms about swearing could prove pedagogically useful. This would provide more insight into English cultures and help learners understand what is acceptable or unacceptable language behaviour. In a sense, as Mercury (1995) points out, “learners need classroom opportunities to discuss ‘dirty word etiquette’”. Learners of English need to realize what swear words are and be able to distinguish what vocabulary is appropriate in which situation (Holster, D. 2005 p. 65).

This subject must not only be approached from the learners’ perspective, but also the teachers’. Teachers need to be prepared to deal with swearing, racial slurs and derogatory remarks. As Mercury (1995) states in her article “they need to be armed with effective methods, materials, and appropriate training”. Sanford Levinson mentions “Teachers in particular may be guilty of evading part of their own responsibilities if they become too fastidious in ‘avoiding…words that shock’” (as cited in Fairman, C. M. 2006, p. 1).

Not only do learners of English need to learn about English culture, which may include British, American, Canadian and Australian cultures, but EFL teachers must also take into consideration Icelandic culture. What may be appropriate language in an appropriate context in a native English speaking country may be different in Iceland. With the status of English changing and evolving in Iceland, it has therefore been influencing the language. Janet Holmes (2001) emphasizes (as cited by Holster, D. 2005, p. 10) “that speakers innovate, sometimes spontaneously, but more often by imitating speakers from other communities”.  

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In Iceland, there are now English derivations of several swear words including fokk, sjitt and sjitturinn. Common knowledge suggests fokk is an expletive which is not usually considered taboo, is apparently much milder than fuck and is mainly used by younger people. Sjitt, on the other hand, has a longer history and is also likely to be heard by middle-aged Icelanders. Andskotinn and djöfullinn are considered to be stronger and more offensive, as I mentioned in the taboo language chapter. Jay and Janschewitz (2008, p. 286) indicate that “… we do know that non-native speakers find their native language more powerful and more emotionally expressive than languages learned later in life”. Fokk was further brought into the Icelandic consciousness by the famous protest sign Helvitis Fokkin Fokk in the so-called “Pots and Pans Revolution” shortly after the bank crash in 2008. This statement can now be found on merchandise. Fokk can be seen in editorials like “Ég fokking nenni þessu ekki” found on Pressan.is on January 26th 2011.

The word fuck can also be found in print in youth-oriented newspapers like The Reykjavik Grapevine an example of which can be found in Issue 2-2011 with Haukur’s 36th editorial “Fuck You, New York Times Travel Section: But not really. More like fuck all of us.” Another example of Iceland’s liberal attitude towards English swear words is the lack of censorship on Icelandic radio, in particular on FM957, and television. They often choose to use explicit versions of English movies or songs such as Cee Lo Green’s Fuck You which is known as The song otherwise known as Forget You in the United States.

Dewaele (2004) conducted a study on the emotional force of swear words and taboo words and his results showed that multilingual speakers used swear words in different languages but swear words or taboo words in the L1 remained the strongest and most offensive. This is what one of the participants in Dewaele’s (2004) research had to say:

Kevin (Finnish L1, English L2, Swedish L3, German L4): I very rarely swear in Finnish but ‘oh shit’ or ‘fuck’ can easily escape my mouth even in quite trivial occasions / they just don’t feel that serious to my (or my hearers’) ears, even though I know they would sound quite horrible to a native speaker (milder English swear words like ‘damn’ for example don’t even sound like swear words to me. If I would happen to hit myself with a hammer the words coming out of my mouth would definitely be in Finnish. (p. 213).
I feel this sums up rather well the attitude of EFL learners towards swearing in English and my attitude towards Icelandic swear words. For example I would have a much stronger reaction if someone called me a *fucking bitch* than if they called me a *drullusokkur*.

In addition there have been shifts in social attitudes which have significantly influenced the use of English swear words in society. Inhibitions have been lessened thus allowing this type of language to be heard on television and in the movies (Holster, D. 2005, p. 11). Holster (2005, p. 11) notes that “As language changes, so do societies’ attitudes towards words considered taboo”. *Fuck* is not as offensive as it was twenty years ago. We may possibly be in the midst of losing one taboo word and searching for a new one.

So what are teachers’ attitudes and approaches to teaching about swearing and appropriate language use in EFL classrooms in Iceland?

### 4. Data Collection and Findings

For this research project, I gathered data in several ways. Firstly I used some classroom observations and participated in a FEKÍ (ATEI: The Association of Teachers of English in Iceland) meeting. The classroom observations were carried out over a period of a year, from spring 2010 to spring 2011 in four schools. During these observations I listened for swear words and watched for the teachers’ reactions when swearing did occur.

Secondly I conducted semi-structured interviews with four EFL teachers to obtain their perspectives on swearing in the classroom and to find out how they cope with this in their classrooms. Two of the English teachers I interviewed are Icelandic and two are native speakers of English. The teachers range from teaching English in playschool and primary, lower secondary and upper secondary. I prepared a written list of questions, but was open to the idea that added questions may arise depending on the interviewee’s answers. I used a digital voice recorder to record the sessions, then analyzed the information. I analyzed the information by looking for similarities and differences in attitudes and approaches to teaching about swear words between interviewees.

These methods allowed for the collection of qualitative data. I compiled a list of instances when I heard swearing in the classroom, and noted the teachers’ reaction, and with the interview data I compared teachers’ responses to questions about swearing. This qualitative
data provided valuable information concerning the attitudes and beliefs the teachers have towards swearing in EFL classrooms and how to approach the subject.

4.1 Classroom Observations

I had the opportunity to observe EFL classrooms taught by four different teachers in four different schools ranging from preschool to lower secondary. During my observations I was able to witness the behaviour and language use of the students. These observations also permitted me to see how the teachers handled swearing in their classrooms.

Except for the preschool, swearing occurred at all educational levels. The students mostly used swear words amongst themselves. However there were a couple of occasions at the lower secondary level when I heard a student call the teacher a bitch. The teachers in these situations either did not hear the student say this or just ignored the language. Fuck seems to be the most commonly used swear word among the students. I noticed a teacher said “watch your language” when giving the students a written assignment.

Swearing is not only limited to learners in lower and upper secondary. Swearing is also apparent at the primary level. While observing a 6th grade English class variations of the word fuck were used along with bitch, ass, and titties. The swearing in the 6th grade class appeared to be brought on by the plural form of the word beach which is beaches. One boy made the connection that beaches sounded like bitches and that ignited other students to share the swear words they knew and it spread through the class like wildfire. I also heard fokk used in a 4th grade class when a girl dropped her book.

4.2 FEKÍ Meeting Observation

At the FEKÍ meeting the topic of students and children swearing came up without any persuasion from me. This was obviously a hot topic and one which everyone had an opinion about and some experience with.

They felt that the children needed to be made aware of appropriate language use in the appropriate context but done in a way without shame and/or blame. Some of the teachers
mentioned this was an opportunity to discuss swearing, where and when it is not appropriate to use it and to elicit more creative words to use instead.

Another theory explored was culture. English swear words, especially the word *fuck*, may have been adopted by Icelanders because they were not allowed to swear in Icelandic. As I pointed out in the sociolinguistic analysis swear words in a language other than one’s L1 is much less emotionally charged or offensive, and therefore English swear words do not have the same impact or offensiveness in Iceland and are considered milder.

### 4.3 Interviews

For privacy purposes I have given my interviewees the pseudonyms Sigrún, Harpa, Ann and Jennifer. Sigrún and Harpa teach at the lower secondary level, Ann teaches at the upper secondary level and Jennifer teaches at the preschool and primary level. The findings report three different perspectives on swearing in EFL classrooms in Iceland. The first viewpoint was that besides the occasional “*shit*”, swearing did not occur in their classes and was not an issue. Sigrún, however, contradicted herself when she stated if she heard swearing she would pull the student aside and inform him or her that this was not appropriate language to use.

The second viewpoint, held by Ann, was when swearing occurs in the classroom it is a great opportunity to have a discussion about this type of language. Icelanders may not all realize that swearing in another culture is different and may be offensive. She uses this chance to have a discussion with her students about the implications of using this type of language in another culture. One example Ann likes to give her students is a true story of a young woman who went to the United States to stay with a family and this girl used the word *fuck* in every other sentence. One night they were going to dinner to another family’s house and the man she was staying with called the family in advance to warn them about her language. Her students are always surprised by the fact that the man had actually called in advance to warn people of her language. Teachers often shy away from this topic because they feel uncomfortable about it. However, she feels, as teachers they are here to educate and should use every opportunity to do just that. Ann feels it is important to open channels of discussion rather than shutting the door.

The third viewpoint, while similar to the first because it doesn’t bother this teacher was not at all what I expected. While swearing was not a typical occurrence in her classrooms, Jennifer
had strong opinions. Her first thought was that we should take a good look at ourselves and figure out why this language is so offensive to us. Why does it make us feel so uncomfortable? She believes native English speakers are more aware of swearing in EFL classrooms and in general than Icelandic teachers who teach English. Jennifer also thinks we should stop giving the word fuck energy and feeding the taboo. Teachers should not be judging the obvious or focusing too much on the swearing. We should model appropriate language for the classroom context to enhance what the learners already have.

The second step was to create a fun environment for teachers and students to explore and expand their knowledge of English and build on the students’ enthusiasm. She wants to introduce and ignite them to English. She believes the environment should be open and inviting and one which allows everyone to be themselves. Why can’t that include swearing? If the teacher is open to swear words, perhaps then the students will be more open to Shakespeare. If students swear, “Who gives a fuck?” was her comment. In 50 years it will be another word or another issue. Jennifer states “When I was a kid we didn’t wear helmets when we rode our bikes. Now we do”.

Basically she believed we should model the language we want our students to learn. She asked if teachers are being passive aggressive or proactive in dealing with swearing if they choose to ignore that language. It all depends on the teachers’ philosophy and attitude. Then she quoted Ghandi by saying “Be the change you want to be”. She also pointed out that fuck just doesn’t hold the same weight here in Iceland because Icelanders don’t have the same taboo behind the word. This is as Dewaele (2004) points out: swear words in L2 are not as offensive as in the L1. It’s we foreigners who need to get over it. She asked, “Why should Icelanders conform to American standards of what is appropriate and what isn’t?”

An interesting difference I would like to point out is the first viewpoint was from two native Icelandic speakers who teach English, Sigrún and Harpa. The second and third viewpoints were from teachers who are native English speakers, Ann and Jennifer.

**5. Discussion**

The results of the interviews were very interesting. Even though I heard swearing in most of the teachers’ classrooms that I observed, Sigrún and Harpa claimed swearing did not occur. I
am unsure whether they were just ignoring the situation, if the swearing was not heard by them or if it just didn’t bother them because English swear words are not offensive to them.

Mercury (1995 p.35) claims “Second language speakers may get a distorted idea of obscene language use due to the influence of movies, hit songs, and popular books where obscene language seems to flow unchecked”. I would argue that students’ learning English need to learn what is appropriate to say in what context and be provided with the opportunity to discuss this type of language in the classroom. This may help them realize what is acceptable and unacceptable. Schmitt and McCarthy explain “that vocabulary is now recognised as ‘the key aspect of learning a language’ and is central to the theory and practice of English language learning and teaching” (as cit ed in Holster, D. 2005 p.43). Omitting the teaching of swear words leaves EFL students inadequately prepared for communicative competence. As language teachers we do not want our students to become active swearers, but we want them to understand the vocabulary and the culture well enough that they fit in but do not get into trouble in English countries or settings. The solution may be to teach them in what context such words can be used.

However, as Jennifer pointed out the students might very well learn on their own what is appropriate and acceptable language in English speaking countries when they travel there. The EFL students who have experienced and used English in a greater variety of situations are more likely to be able to appropriately judge in what context swear words can be used (Dewaele, J.-M., 2004, p. 220). When I first moved to Iceland and went to the pools I was very uncomfortable getting naked in front of all the other women, because we just do not do that in Canada. But gradually I became accustomed to it and learned to be comfortable in that situation. People can learn and adjust to what behaviour and language is appropriate in different contexts in different cultures. Jay (2009) states “We all grow up in a culture in which we have to learn which speech is appropriate and which is offensive in a given situation”.

Fairman claims (2006, p. 16) that “Obscenity lies not in words or things, but in attitudes that people have about words and things”. Western societies are becoming more tolerant towards taboo language, and the media have probably been the most influential factor in changing the public’s attitude regarding the acceptability of certain words in the English language.
Chiarantano (2005) points out that “Language is the means we use to express our thoughts, emotions, desires, frustrations, and hopes. Swearing is part of expressive language”. Swearing is an integral part of the English language and will always be until we as a society stop feeding into the taboo. Emotionally charged language is the easiest type of language to recall and the word *fuck* is rather fun to use especially because of its versatility. I would argue that lessons or discussions about swearing should be included to help students distinguish what is or is not appropriate.

However, there is another view to consider. As English language teachers we are often confronted with the issue of what is appropriate language for our students. We want our students to become active listeners, creative writers and to increase their communicative competence. However, when we stop and think about it we never teach our students to “become more effective swearers” as Grice (2010) says. Effective swearers know when, where and how to swear to whom. As long as swear words continue being taboo, they will continue being dirty and offensive. However, Grice (2010) argues “They lose their dirtiness as soon as you stop and think about them, what they actually mean and whether they are adjectives, verbs or nouns. For a learner to understand the rules properly, they really need to see how others feel about them”. Therefore as Grice (2010) points out “Studying dirty words kills them”. So, perhaps the best way to teach English language learners about taboo language is to continue to suppress it and feed into the taboo by having negative reactions to swear words when they are heard in the classroom.

6. Conclusion

Swearing in EFL classrooms was shocking to me in the beginning. However, the more I have been reflecting on this topic and the more I have been reflecting on myself as a consequence of this research the less shocked I am by swearing in EFL classes in Iceland. Perhaps this is because as Grice (2010) says that studying taboo words makes them lose their dirtiness and offensiveness. I do not want to give these particular words anymore power or energy than they already have. I personally also quite enjoy using these words and choose to do so at my own discretion. I usually use them in a humorous fashion or to give my sentences personality and/or an exclamation point. Perhaps I am being a little rebellious in saying how much I enjoy swearing. The truth is, I do not like it when my children swear, and I would never
swear on a job interview or in hearing distance of my boss. Once again, this demonstrates the importance of context. But who am I to say these words should not be used? As an English teacher I am here to ignite and encourage English language instruction and want to create an environment where I as a teacher and my students can feel comfortable to be ourselves, comfortable expressing ourselves and to help my students explore and expand on their English knowledge. If that includes the use of taboo language then so be it. I however will not feed the fire of taboo by drawing attention to this type of language but will instead model language that I hope the students will use. As Wajnryb (2005, p. 9) quotes, “In the words of Ashley Montagu, an early researcher of swearing, the fundamental truth is that ‘no people has ever abandoned its habits of swearing merely because the State…forbade it’”. Students of English will most likely continue swearing regardless of what I do in the classroom. The fact is *fuck* is just another word.

Teachers will react differently to swearing in their classrooms. Some will be unaware of it while others may be hyper-sensitive to it. The way a teacher reacts to such language depends on many factors like their background, culture, values, beliefs, religion, their style of teaching and even what kind of mood they might be in the day *fuck* pops up in their class. I believe the personal attitudes of the English language teacher will determine how he or she approaches the teaching about swear words in EFL classrooms in Iceland.

Student teachers of EFL/ESL are provided with the tools to teach the four language skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening. I believe they should also be provided with the tools necessary to teach about taboo language and the appropriate language usage in the appropriate context. Swear words need to be addressed to some degree in the classroom. Reflection is a great tool for teachers and I believe especially useful for student teachers. Mercury (1995, p.32) concludes that “We must begin to consider how best to approach taboo […] language in our classrooms.” This subject should be discussed in teacher training so new teachers know how to approach the subject of swearing, or have at least reflected on what they might do, when it inevitably comes up in their classrooms.
Resources


Informal interviews with four English teachers and observations of their English lessons that were taken over a period of 4 weeks in October 2010 and observations from spring 2010 and spring 2011.


You Tube. *Want to Learn English?* Accessed March 5th 2011 from: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u-3f568mzwA