

“WHAT THE F*CK WAS THAT?!” A PRELIMINARY STUDY ON THE USE OF SWEAR WORDS BY UNIVERSITY ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN CHILE.

JAVIERA ADAROS S. * y ANGELA TIRONI C. **
Universidad de Chile

ABSTRACT: Currently, not abundant research exploring the use of emotion-laden words— such as swear words— in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts has been conducted. In fact, most of the studies have focused on positive and negative emotion words (Pavlenko, 2008) — ignoring taboo words (Jay, 2008; Pavlenko, 2008; Dewaele, 2010)— and the attention has been drawn to their use by L2 users or/and multilinguals in ESL (English as a Second Language) contexts. Therefore, this preliminary two-fold study attempts to explore, on one hand, how the self-reported knowledge of swear words by EFL learners in tertiary education in Chile relate to specific variables; on the other hand, we wanted to understand when, where and with whom (Jay, 2008) these learners reported using swear words in English. We collected information through an online questionnaire, which elicited their self-perceived proficiency in English, educational background, initial exposure to L2 and a list of the swear words they claimed to know. This information helped us to explore the variables that relate to swear word knowledge and also to categorize the instances when swearing occurs, using existing categories (Jay, 2008; Horan, G. 2013; Pavlenko, 2014) and generating new ones. The findings suggest EFL learners mostly swear as an Automatic Emotional Response (Jay & Janchewitz, 2008), as well as a face-saving act and to protect others from the offensiveness of L1 swear words. Finally, this also helped us define what variables were worth considering in the second stage of our research, as they relate to incidental and explicit learning in EFL.

KEYWORDS: pragmatics, EFL, swear words, emotional language, emotion-laden words

* Para correspondencia, dirigirse a Javiera Adaros (jadaros@u.uchile.cl)

** Para correspondencia, dirigirse a Angela Tironi (atironi@uchile.cl)

“¿QUÉ SHUSH... FUE ESO?”: ESTUDIO PRELIMINAR SOBRE EL USO DE IMPROPERIOS EN ESTUDIANTES UNIVERSITARIOS DE INGLÉS COMO LENGUA EXTRANJERA EN CHILE

RESUMEN: Una pequeña parte de los estudios sobre el uso de vocabulario emotivo en contextos de enseñanza de inglés como lengua extranjera se ha enfocado en el uso de los improperios. De hecho, la mayor parte de estos estudios ha dado cuenta de vocabulario emotivo positivo y negativo (Pavlenko, 2008), ignorando las palabras tabúes (Jay, 2008; Pavlenko, 2008; Dewaele, 2010) y orientando su atención hacia los hablantes de una segunda lengua y/o hablantes de múltiples lenguas en contexto de enseñanza de inglés como segunda lengua (L2). Es por esto que este estudio preliminar tiene como propósito explorar las variables que inciden en el aprendizaje de improperios por parte de aprendientes de inglés como lengua extranjera (ILE) en la educación superior en Chile, y a la vez, entender cuándo, dónde y con quién (Jay, 2008) los hablantes reportan usar improperios en inglés. Para esta etapa recolectamos información proporcionada por los participantes a través de un breve cuestionario en línea que incluyó la autopercepción que ellos tienen de su nivel de inglés, información sobre su nivel educacional, contacto inicial con la L2 y una lista con los improperios que ellos dicen conocer. La información obtenida nos ayudó a categorizar las instancias en las que los hablantes usan improperios, utilizando categorías tanto ya propuestas (Jay, 2008; Horan, G. 2013; Pavlenko, 2014) como emergentes. De esta forma descubrimos que los aprendientes de ILE no solo usan improperios como una respuesta emocional automática (Jay & Janchewitz, 2008), sino que también lo hacen como una forma de mitigar el impacto que el improperio tiene frente a los demás, ya sea para proteger a otros de su vulgaridad o para protegerse a sí mismos del juicio de los demás. Por último, esta información nos permitió definir qué variables considerar en la segunda etapa de la investigación pues tienen relación con el aprendizaje implícito y explícito de ILE.

PALABRAS CLAVE: pragmática, ILE, improperios, lenguaje emotivo

1. INTRODUCTION

Exploring on emotional language and the relation of emotions with second language acquisition has long been considered of secondary importance in Applied Linguistics. Recent interest in examining the role of emotions in the field of SLA has been motivated by researchers like Pavlenko and Dewaele (2002) who have studied emotional language among bilinguals and multilinguals. Their findings have greatly contributed to beginning to understand the role of emotions and emotion-laden words in ESL. According to Pavlenko (2008), the conceptualization of emotions is a dynamic process in which the learners re-shape their world by means of all the languages that they speak. In turn, Dewaele (2015, p 13)¹ claims that “emotions are at the heart of the foreign language learning process” and as such we consider them crucial for SLA theory.

By and large, the literature on taboo language is rather scarce, probably as a result of the social stigma associated to swearing, “it is a common assumption that people

¹ “On Emotions in Foreign Language Learning and Use” https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281716361_On_Emotions_in_Foreign_Language_Learning_and_Use. Accessed 10 Jun. 2017.

who swear frequently are lazy, do not have adequate vocabulary, lack education, or simply cannot control themselves” (Jay, K. and Jay, T., 2015). In this line, dedicating attention to their relation to ESL learning may be deemed of less relevance. As a consequence of this, no extensive research has been conducted in exploring the acquisition of swear words among EFL learners, and most of the study has focused on exploring swearing either among native speakers and/or bilinguals who have acquired and used their L2 in inner circle² countries.

Considering that swear words are not part of the curriculum in tertiary education programs, our study attempts to explore on how learners of English in an EFL learning context (Chile, an expanding circle country) use them and how many related lemmas they report to know. For this reason, we focused on examining the possible correlation between certain variables and the number of swear words reported by participants. At the same time, we attempted to explore on the pragmatic dimension of the use of swear words by EFL learners.

This study has taken a multidisciplinary perspective within the domain of second language acquisition theory to analyzing the data. Hence, the phenomenon under study has not only focused on the lexical dimension of SLA but also on the pragmatic dimension involved in second language acquisition.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *EFL instruction in Chile*

The development of the national curriculum of English in our country has had two major landmarks in the last three decades. The first one was the Education Reform Law passed in 1990 whose objective was to bring full educational coverage and quality to the entire population (Donoso S. 2004). After this reform the teaching of English, along with all other subjects, was regulated by “planes y programas”, a set of documents that outlined the core contents to be taught from fifth grade to the equivalent of twelfth grade in our school system. The first documents were published in 1998, the teaching content was focused on the development of receptive skills (MINEDUC, 1998), hence the development of language competence was reduced to a passive understanding of spoken and written English. Although the document suggests teachers should avoid focusing on grammar, it seemed inevitable to continue a tradition of grammar translation as a fundamental method of instruction, as a result “a significant number of students are not able to communicate in a foreign language” (Yilorm, Y. 2016).

The second cornerstone in the history of ELT was the publication of the results of the standardized SIMCE test that was implemented nationwide in 2012. The test was developed by Cambridge ESOL Examination and the sample reached an 87% of the

² Inner circle countries, countries in which English is spoken as a primary language. (Crystal, 2003)

target population of eleventh grade-students enrolled in the Chilean school system that year. The results revealed that only 18% of the students who took the test received a certification of either A2 or B1 level in CEFR. The alarming results led the Ministry of Education to reinvigorate the ongoing campaign that was reformulating the national curriculum for English language teaching. The focus now shifted to the development of all four skills. A series of documents, *Bases Curriculares y Programas de Inglés*, were now being published with not only content changes but also suggesting the adoption of a new teaching approach - the sociocultural model to teaching foreign languages. However, the impact of these new curricular changes cannot be measured to this day, since there is still resistance among English teachers to redirect their teaching to communicative objectives and a series of other systemic reasons that involve pre-teaching training process and social problems in the classroom that contribute to poor learning quality.

In sum, the teaching of English has long and steadily focused on discrete grammar points as core curricular contents, giving little emphasis or none to the development of productive skills, let alone pragmatic competence and/or taboo language. Finally, the teaching of English has been held on language ideologies which presume British RP as a standard variety of English to be modeled and taught in our classrooms.

Consequently, much of what Chilean learners of English achieve in terms of language competence and knowledge can be attributed to either a higher socio-economic background or the result of having attended private education institutions.

2.2 Vocabulary knowledge

The learning objectives of the new ministerial programs promote an integrated learning of communicative skills (Mineduc, 2013) however, students are mostly asked to identify vocabulary and grammar structures by means of translation and theoretical explanations (Yilorm, Y. 2016). Although this cannot be deemed to be true to all educational contexts, the question still lies as to how learners of English learn to communicate in the target language.

A recent study that analyzed vocabulary acquisition theories underlying the national curricula for English, identifies mismatches between theoretical assumptions and what is developed in Chilean public school textbooks (Acosta, M., Castro, J., Demarchi, D., Jerez, M., Maltes, J., Miranda, P., Moraga, C., Rojas, M., 2016). Incongruencies that added to lack of teaching methodological knowledge from teachers do not promote vocabulary learning. The importance of this lies in that vocabulary knowledge is a crucial indicator of reading achievement, therefore ignoring its importance is denying learners a vital component of language learning. As a matter of fact, studies reveal that a larger vocabulary size implies a better comprehension of both written and spoken texts (Nation, 2001).

Vocabulary knowledge is seen as a storage system of mental representations and as the ability to use words (Dóczy, B & Kormos, J. 2016). It involves two major interrelated dimensions that are worth considering when assessing learners' vocabulary

and its impact in all four communicative skills. These two dimensions are breadth and depth of knowledge. Breadth refers to the quantity of words (lemmas) that a learner is able to identify or produce (both in isolation and in spoken or written text). Depth, on the other hand, refers to how well a learner knows a given lemma, i.e. synonyms, antonyms, sounds, grammatical behavior, collocations, register, connotation, etc. Nation (2001) separates the dimensions of receptive and productive knowledge and distinguishes three aspects: word form; word meaning and word use, Nation as cited in Dóczy & Kormos, (2016). Measuring depth of vocabulary knowledge is thus a difficult endeavor, let alone, knowledge of swear words.

A strong correlation of explicit vocabulary instruction has been identified in the breadth of vocabulary knowledge; however, evidence regarding implicit learning is also very strong. In this study, the decision has been made to measure breadth of swear word knowledge by eliciting the words the subjects report to know. Since taboo language and more specifically swear words are not part of traditional curriculum, it would be interesting to understand how learners acquire these words and how they use them. The upcoming stages of this research are likely to provide more evidence to establish correlations between types of learning and breadth of vocabulary knowledge.

2.3 Emotional vocabulary and emotion-laden words

Aneta Pavlenko (2008) defines emotion-laden words as “words that do not refer to emotions directly but instead express or elicit emotions from their interlocutors.” Among their subcategories we can find taboo and swear words, insults, as well as endearments, which may easily overlap since “taboo and swearwords that commonly function as insults may in some contexts appear as friendly terms of affection.” Acquiring and using emotional vocabulary in any other second language learned (LX) is constrained by the learners’ experience with these lexical items in their L1. In her book, *The Bilingual Mind: And What It Tells Us about Language and Thought* (2014), Pavlenko identifies and categorizes certain instances in which bilinguals would use (or not use) emotional vocabulary. These instances can be influenced by the order in which a language is acquired, the dominant language in the speakers, the onset of learning and the context in which a language is acquired.

One of the main challenges faced by LX learners is the categorization of the new vocabulary in terms of “full conceptual equivalents, partial equivalents, and non-equivalents.” (2014, p. 257) This would entail a process of affective re-socialization in the speakers’ LX to learn what triggers the emotions, the contexts in which such emotions are displayed, and the consequences of it. Following this, we can find speakers who would prefer to use emotional vocabulary in their L1 because there is no expression in their LX that can fully convey the intended meaning of their expression. At the same time, some would prefer to use emotional vocabulary such as taboo and swear words in their new language to emotionally detach from the illocutionary force of these expressions in their L1.

2.4 Taboo and swear words

Jean-Marc Dewaele's studies (2002, 2004, 2005, 2008, 2010) have mostly focused on multilinguals rather than bilinguals, but same as Pavlenko (2004, 2008, 2014), he has identified a number of factors that influence the use and frequency of use of emotional vocabulary. He has thoroughly researched the use of taboo words and swear words in multilinguals. He identifies swear words and taboo words as "multifunctional, pragmatic units which assume, in addition to the expression of emotional attitudes, various discourse functions." (2004, p. 205)

Regarding the factors that influence the use and frequency of use of swear words, he signaled the context of learning as one of the most salient ones in one of his most recent studies. The main reason for this is that when comparing those speakers who learned in an instructed context to the ones who learned in a naturalistic or a mixed context, they not only used swear words less frequently, but also seemed to be less sure about their offensiveness. This leaves gaps in their pragmatic competence (Horan, 2016) because they would usually feel insecure when using these words—in case they decide to use them.

2.5 The pragmatics of swearing

Timothy Jay and Kristin Janschewitz (2008) have explored the contextual variables in the process of swearing and have claimed that "people learn to judge when, where, and with whom it is appropriate to swear, or where swearing would be offensive." Timothy Jay had previously defined swearing as "the use of taboo language with the purpose of expressing the speakers' emotional state and communicating that information to listeners." (1992) Following this, the researchers state that "swearing is not necessarily impolite, inasmuch as offensive language is often used within the boundaries of what is considered situationally appropriate in discourse." (2008) They also believe that people's experience with a language shapes the occurrence and emotional perception of swearing, conceptualizing all instances of it as either propositional or nonpropositional. The former is "consciously planned and intentional" and "can be polite or impolite, or potentially neither", while the latter is "unintentional, unplanned and uncontrollable", and thus cannot be seen as polite or impolite.

Jay and Janschewitz (2008) identify a number of variables that can relate to the use of emotional vocabulary, being gender one of the most important. According to them, men are more likely to swear than women, both in situations related to anger or frustration, and in company of other men in informal contexts. Also, males use more offensive language than females. In addition to gender, religiosity and social status are other factors taken into account by the researchers, as well as the social-physical context in which the interactions take place and the level of formality of them.

Finally, Timothy and Kristin Jay (2008) state that late learners of English seem to be "aware of the offensiveness of taboo language but less aware of the way in

which speech context moderates offensiveness.” Even though their research only considered both native and non-native speakers of English in the US, this ‘pragmatic gap’ relates to what Dewaele and Pavlenko proposed in their study (2002). This re-socialization of emotion in a new language would undoubtedly represent a challenge for speakers of an LX at the moment of using swear words.

2.6 Swearing in EFL

Geraldine Horan (2013) referred to teaching swear words in Foreign Language Learning (FLL) acknowledging linguistic attitudes from both learners and teachers. She defined cursing and swearing “as separate but interrelated utterances”, defining the former as “an expression which can be in the form of a ritualized formula directed at the addressee (...) or through invocation of a divine being”, whereas swearing “is related to ‘cursing’, in that it calls on divine witness to swearing an oath” but nowadays it “refers to something that is taboo and/or stigmatized in the culture; should not be interpreted literally; and can be used to express strong emotions and attitudes” (2013, p. 285)

Horan (2013) also mentions that the attitudes teachers have toward swearing are worth considering because the learners’ sociolinguistic performance may be hindered by the way teachers react when swearing takes place in the classroom. The author holds that “whether a language learner chooses to swear, or even avoids swearing, she or he should at least be aware of the patterns, contexts and repercussions of swearing.” This refers to the ‘pragmatic gap’ mentioned by the previous authors.

3. METHOD

A mixed method approach was conducted to examine how certain variables might impact on the number of swear words reported by participants, and to explore on the pragmatic dimension of using swear words among EFL learners whose mother tongue is Spanish.

3.1. Instrument

An online questionnaire was designed with both closed and open-ended questions to explore on how different variables could be correlated to swear word knowledge. The quantitative section of the instrument attempted to examine how socio-economic background of participants, type of schooling, onset of L2 learning, religion, gender, type of initial contact with L2, initial contact with L2 and/or frequency of swearing in both languages would correlate or relate to breadth of swear word knowledge reported. The qualitative section aimed to explore on where, when, with whom and why learners would prefer to swear in English instead of Spanish.

Regarding the online form design, it was not clear whether the participants would be proficient enough to understand all questions and concepts used in English;

hence it was decided that the form should be written in Spanish. Additionally, this decision was also based on the fundamental premise that the level of English may not necessarily result in lower or higher vocabulary breadth. This emerged from the fact that investigating the relationship between self-perceived level of English and number of swear words reported was one of the foci under study.

The questionnaire was examined by experts in the fields of psychology and linguistics to ensure the validity of the instrument. In the pilot process, eight students of the same population under study participated from three different universities. After that process the questionnaire was adjusted and modified.

3.2. Sampling

The type of sampling was purposive and the participants were selected based on the following criteria: university students enrolled in English programs, both English pedagogy and B.A. in English linguistics and literature, regardless their self-perceived level of English.

English teachers from different university programs were contacted and asked to send the questionnaire via their class mailing lists to their students, who were invited to respond voluntarily.

The questionnaire was filled out by students of English programs in six universities in Chile which were public, semi-public and private educational institutions. 104 questionnaires were received from Santiago and Valdivia. After an initial examination, eight forms were discarded on the grounds of their not being complete and one being duplicated.

The final sample consisted of learners who identified themselves as female (78%), male (20%), and transgender (1%); 1% did not identify with any. Half of the sample did most of their schooling in semi-private schools, 29.6 % in private schools and the remaining 20.4% in public institutions. The information gathered is extensive and a brief of the socioeconomic background of participants is provided in the appendix. The analysis of the results will be explained in more detail in the following section.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Quantitative results

Most of the data pertain to the domain of discrete information in the form of nominal data; nonetheless a numerical data was assigned to each category explored in order to examine the relationship between individual variables and the number of words reported. It must be brought to attention that not a single variable seems to correlate or relate directly with breadth of emotion laden words knowledge per se, but the isolation of individual variables and the analysis of their correlations with number of words reported may shed light as to what or which factors may have a slightly higher impact on the number of swear words that learners report to know.

4.1.1 Age of onset of learning and Self-perceived level of English

The first variables that were examined were the age of onset of learning and self-perceived level of English. Although only the age of onset of learning corresponds to numerical data, the other variable was assigned a number varying from one— which corresponded to beginner level of English— to 4— which equated advanced level of English. The results in Pearson correlation show infinitesimal negative correlation $r = -.1$ between the age of onset of learning and the number of words reported, which may be interpreted in line with part of the theory in that an earlier onset of learning may impact vocabulary use and frequency of use of emotion laden words (Dewaele, 2004). Thus, the negative correlation may suggest an effect of the age of onset of learning on the number of words reported in this sample, hence the younger that learning was initiated the higher the number of self-reported words. However, considering the weak relationship between these variables a more plausible interpretation may be suggested by Dewaele’s findings in that L2 speakers who have learned the second language at an older age may be less likely to use swear words than those who have learned at an earlier age (2010).

As regards self-perceived level of English, the data shows a more significant but still weak correlation between the variables. In line with theory, a more proficient learner would know more emotion-laden words than less proficient ones and seemingly “higher proficiency learners use a greater proportion of low-frequency words.” (Dewaele & Pavlenko, 2004) Therefore, $r = .23$ was found to be the highest correlation among all the variables examined. (see Table 1)

Variable	Pearson Correlation
Age of onset of learning	-0.15881803
Self-perceived level of English	0.23186364

Table 1 Age of onset of learning and Self-perceived level of English

4.1.2 Gender and religion

In the studies conducted by Jay & Jay (2008) women whose L1 was English were found to swear less than men; even though our sample did not consider native speakers of English, we thought of it as relevant since in our cultural context swearing is not seen as offensive as it has been reported to be in the literature examined. In fact, our participants reported to swear in both Spanish and English, being the L1 their preferred language for swearing.

For this variable we ran a simple statistical analysis using percentages and the numbers are the following: 33% of the female participants reported swearing in English more than three times a day. In contrast, 12% of the male participants reported swearing

in English with the same frequency. Although we acknowledge that the number of male participants is significantly lower than the number of females, the size of the sample suffices to conduct this sort of analysis. In sum, we believe the numbers shown above may challenge the theory in this respect. It is worth mentioning that this data also includes participants who reported to feel identified with transgender and non-binary gender as well. (see Table 2)

As for religion, a series of creeds were reported by participants being in a substantial proportion Catholics, Christian denominations and agnostics. The results show an insignificant negative correlation between religion and number of lemmas reported, which can suggest that in our sociocultural environment religion does not seem to play a significant role in how both female and male learners express emotions through taboo words.

Variable	P correlation
Religion	-0.0647964

Table 2 Religion

4.1.3 Source of learning

The findings regarding the self-reported source of learning showed an interesting positive Pearson correlation for both explicit learning and incidental learning. Though the vast majority of our participants reported having started learning in primary school, they also mentioned playing video games, watching TV and movies, and listening to music as their source of learning. (see Table 3)

Variable	P correlation
Primary school	0.02
Playing video games	0.12
Watching TV	0.07
Watching movies	0.17
Listening to music	0.13

Table 3 Source of learning

According to what has been stated by Dewaele and other authors, the context of acquisition is directly linked to the use and frequency of use of emotional vocabulary, and these findings, despite their extent, provided us with evidence to support this.

In addition to this, we found a negative correlation between direct exposure to English and the number of self-reported lemmas. In these cases, only a few participants had had the chance to interact with native speakers as a source of learning, either in

Chile (-0.04) or abroad (-0.01). We suggest that interacting with native speakers may have given our participants a certain pragmatic understanding of swearing, though further research is needed in order to claim such relation.

4.2 Qualitative results

Different authors have identified and categorized the instances in which swearing occurs. We drew on this knowledge to categorize our reported instances but as it was previously mentioned, we also used some emerging categories that could give an account of what was not stated by the existing research. (see Table 4)

The self-reported instances were categorized as it follows:

Theory	Purpose (name of category)	With whom	Where/when	Number of self-reported instances	Reporters' gender
<i>Swearing and impoliteness in L1</i> Jay, T & K. Jay (2008)	AER (automatic emotional response)	Alone With friends	Unexpected events (either positive or negative)	38	Females Males Non-binary
<i>Polite propositional swearing</i> Jay, T & K. Jay (2008)	Social Harmony (community building)	Friends Classmates	University context Social gatherings	17	Females Males
Emerging category	Mitigation/ Face saving act	Non native English speakers	Social gatherings Public places	12	Females Males
Horan, G. (2016)	Display of identity/ Fun	Friends	Classroom University context Social gatherings	8	Females Males
Emerging category	Social distancing/ Privacy seeking	Others	Social gatherings Public places	7	Females Males Non-binary

<i>Bilingualism</i> Pavlenko, A. (2014)	No equivalent concept available in L1 Concept coding	L2 users	L2 classroom University context Social gatherings	6	Females Males Transgender
Emerging category	Aesthetics	Friends	Classroom University context Social gatherings	6	Females
<i>Bilingualism</i> Pavlenko, A. (2014)	Inner speech	Alone	Home/ anytime	5	Females Males
Emerging category	Mitigation/ protection	Children Non native English speakers	Social gatherings Public places	4	Females

Table 4 Categorization of instances of swearing

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Quantitative results

The results of the quantitative analysis must be taken with caution, although a positivistic model to studying language related issues permits a more objective analysis of the linguistic phenomenon, the numeral data stemming from the analysis must be examined against a thorough qualitative analysis of participants' perceptions and interpretations of how they use swear words. In sum, although the data is essentially nominal and their interpretation must be cross analyzed with the qualitative data, the findings regarding frequency of use specifically and context of learning in general are deemed valuable for future research.

5.1.1 Gender

Concerning the results for gender, they could be interpreted under a socio-cultural perspective on how the women in our study differ in their use of emotional laden language from the ones Jay and Jay studied, who focused their study on Americans or

people living in the US. Those women were found to swear less than men on grounds of social representations of women’s use of language. For example, research shows that women would be more sensitive to using socially unacceptable language in public contexts. However, the fact that the female participants in our study reported to swear more often than men, sheds interesting light as to how the Chilean women in our study use emotional taboo language in their diverse social interactions.

5.1.2. Learning contexts

The teaching of English as a foreign language in tertiary education in Chile has been mainly focused on developing linguistic competence, leaving very little room for the development of communicative competence. Although, a great number of English programs use textbooks which present communicative contexts, the input they present is non authentic and the social interactions presented differ greatly from an authentic interaction. Therefore, EFL learners do not develop pragmatic competence in their L2 which resembles a natural setting for learning³. Thus, the great number and variety of swear words reported by some students suggest a relationship between non-classroom sources of input and the breadth of word knowledge. It is not clear whether the participants have learned those words in parallel to classroom instruction or whether the media has been their main source of input. The national curriculum does not include the pragmatic domain in the textbooks, hence it can be assumed that these participants learned those words from other sources different from classroom instruction.

Therefore, assuming that these participants have learned swear words incidentally, the numbers support the common held view that it is media (television, internet, movies), music and video games what provides learners with the major source of input.

5.2 *Qualitative results*

The preliminary results of this study show interesting findings regarding its qualitative results. It is important to mention that the categories we used for the different instances when swearing was used usually overlap, which means that one participant may have reported three different ways of using swear words, while another may have reported just one.

5.2.1 Automatic emotional response

Firstly, the highest number of self-reported instances is *Automatic emotional response* (AER), which accounts for 38 instances. Following what has been claimed by

³ Arguably, the question still remains as to which English should be chosen to teach pragmatic competence, as it is not clear how the pragmatic dimension of any language should be standardized given their unmarked nature.

some researchers, speakers who report a high proficiency in the TL would usually report using more emotional vocabulary. However, in our study, we found that post-intermediate learners were the ones who reported using most swear words as AER (15 participants), closely followed by intermediate learners (12 participants). Even though the number of advanced learners of English (22) was lower than the ones for post-intermediate (36) and intermediate (29), swearing as AER was used by only 8 participants, which is considerably low compared to the other two categories.

Secondly, even though the category labeled as *Concept coding* was not widely used, it was regarded as relevant for our analysis. Pavlenko's claim about affective re-socialization (2008) seems to play a role in this way of using swear words. These speakers may have already undergone such process since all of them reported having started learning English by watching TV, movies, and listening to music; most mentioned having started learning at school as well, and more than half of the participants mentioned playing video games as their initial contact with the language. Regarding their age of onset of learning, this goes from three to ten years old. Based on this evidence, which we acknowledge to be scant, we could agree with Dewaele and the other researchers who claim that the context of acquisition is of foremost importance for the use of emotional vocabulary. We believe if our participants underwent a process of affective re-socialization, this may have been possible by their incidental learning that seemed to have complemented what they learned at school.

5.2.2 Emerging categories: Aesthetics, Mitigation/Protection, Mitigation/Face saving and Social distancing/Privacy

There are emerging categories that may expand the scope of the existing ones or even serve as starting points for further research. As our study focused only on EFL learners in an expanding circle country, we can only use these new categories for similar cases. For example, in the case of *Aesthetics*, the way swear words are used by the participants in our Spanish-speaking context seems to differ greatly from the way they are used in inner circle countries by similar groups of people. Therefore, we may conclude that this type of category would not be used in a description of the use of swear words, or at least, not in the same way.

Secondly, categories such as *Aesthetics* and *Mitigation/ Protection* are reported to be used only by women, whereas the other two emerging categories, *Mitigation/ Face-saving act* and *Social distancing/ Privacy seeking*, are reported to be used by both women and men, and by women, men, and a non-binary, respectively. Though it is not possible to theorize about gender preferences for swearing, we can mention this to start a discussion that includes traditional genders and non-traditional ones, such as non-binaries.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that out of 96 participants, only one reported using swear words for insulting others, though not in a face-to-face interaction; this participant reported swearing in a low voice to insult a person near them when walking

in the street and being unable to pass them. However, the fact that this participant reported swearing in a low voice made us classify it as *Mitigation/ Face-saving act*.

6. CONCLUSION

Even though taboo and swear words are not part of the EFL curriculum, students still learn them, usually through incidental learning, which can easily leave them with a ‘pragmatic gap’. Also, teachers often deem these expressions as ‘offensive’ (without considering their different degrees of offensiveness), which can confuse learners even more. Therefore, including taboo and swear words in the EFL classroom could fill in the ‘pragmatic gap’ that most students have when they have not had the opportunity of experiencing this in inner circle countries.

Also, the integration of different sources of learning in the curriculum can greatly benefit students. Since technological advances have become mainstream, deterring students from using different instances of ‘real English’ in their learning process may increase the ‘pragmatic gap’ mentioned above.

Regarding gender, although the results of our study do not shed light on the relationship between gender and the number of self-reported swear words in our learning context, we suggest broadening the scope to include and examine different types beyond the traditional binary female and male categories. So far, little research in this field has considered this new approach and we believe this could enhance and even challenge the existing theory.

We believe the future expansion of our work may contribute to the study and teaching of interlanguage pragmatics in the EFL classroom by beginning a discussion on the relevance of the pragmatic dimension involved in learning taboo words in our context.

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APPENDIX 1

Questionnaire