

Teaching Swear Words for Communication

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Abstract

Students often learn Swear Words from films on TV, movie, or VCD then they often practise using the words to their friends in campus inappropriately because they do not know the meaning, the sense, and the 'level of insult' while using the words. Teaching swear words as a material for English for Communication to the students of Mechanical Engineering is one way to give the knowledge relating to the words. Knowing the meaning, the sense, and the insult 'level' of swear words, most students finally can use the words appropriately.

Keywords: teaching swear words

1. Introduction

On the basis of Mechanical Department, State Polytechnic of Semarang (*Polines*) curriculum, English is taught for four semesters i.e. two semesters taught in the first and the second semester and the rest are in the third and fourth semesters. In general, the first and the second semester refer to the English material concerning the students field (mechanical engineering) or Mechanical Engineering English and the two other semesters are designed with the English for Communication, including the knowledge of swearing.

English swear words such as 'shit', 'fuck', 'cunt', 'damn' etc. are often heard when we watch films on television, movie, or VCD. Swearing is a part of culture which is belonging to the language using community (Peregrine Worsthome, 2001). Therefore it would be better if we know the meaning of every swear word which is uttering in the film dialogues to get the complete meaning and sense of the films.

Students who often watch English film sometimes do not catch the meaning of the swear words the actors or actress uttered. They could only guess the sense or the situation the use of the swear words in the films. Interestingly, students often use or practise the swear words they have learned from the films to his or her friends in campus although they do not realize 'how bad', 'how rude', or 'how vulgar' the swear words they uttered and what impact would probably happen to other parties (students) hearing his swear words.

Hearing students uttered swear words among them outside the classroom was uneasy feeling. A punishment will be given if they do inside classroom when joining English class. Therefore it is important to give the students the lessons of swear words in the class of English for Communication.

The aim of giving the lesson on swear words is to give the students enough knowledge on swear words such as the kinds of swear words usually uttered, the level of swear words (from 'mild' to 'very very bad' or 'maximally taboo' such as the words 'fuck' and 'cunt'), the meaning of every swear words etc. By doing so, the students will have enough knowledge on swear words and therefore they would not use or utter the 'bad words' in any place and time without knowing the context or situation.

2. What is Swearing?

Many works on swearing note that it appears to be an extremely widespread linguistic phenomenon and the idea that swearing is a readily definable and universal category of linguistic behaviour.

Of course, the average speaker of English does not worry about what swearing is: to them it is self-evident, as are most of the other cultural categories embodied in the English language. If pressed to define swearing, they might describe it in terms of "bad language" and "four letter words".

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines swearing as follows:

To utter a form of oath lightly or irreverently, as a mere intensive, or an expression of anger, vexation or other strong feeling . . . to utter a profane oath, or use profane language habitually; more widely, to use bad language. (OED XVII: 367)

Crystal (1987:10) defines the function of swear words as "emotional expression", making no attempt to delineate them from other emotive forms in language other than to say that "Swear words and obscenities are probably the commonest signals to be used in this way".

Andersson & Trudgill (1992:53) define swearing as (a) refer to something taboo in a given culture, (b) to be interpreted non-literally and (c) used to express strong emotions and attitudes.

3. The Reasons for Swearing

- To express feelings in words rather than actions, especially if we do not have a larger vocabulary;
- to seem manly;
- to shock people;
- because everyone else does (Ozideas, 1999).

3.1 To express feeling in words rather than actions

As to the first reason, when even two-year-old children hear and use the two pelvic swear words daily, and they are 'de rigeur' rather than shock worthy, there is nothing especially manly about limiting our vocabulary to them.

3.2 To seem manly

As to the second reason, consider how language and thinking are related. One theory about language is that the thinking available to us is limited by the words available to us. This is not completely true, because most people can think of things and yet be unable to think of the words for them, but it is true that the 'shorthand' language we use can restrict how we think. Concepts, clichés and swear words set the stage of our mind.

3.3 To shock people

Thirdly, at present we have a vicious spiral with swear words, as well as with violence and the more unkindly forms of sex.

3.4 Because everyone else does

Many people, if it could not be said everyone, utter swear words. We can see the frequency of using swear words among the speaker of English when watching films on television, movie, or VCD.

4. Inappropriate versus Appropriate

Kristy Beers, a University of Florida researcher, says there may be times when swearing is appropriate. Using bad words in a conversation can sometimes reduce tensions or exhibit solidarity with a group. We have been told all our lives that swearing is inappropriate, but there are actually times when it may be appropriate, if the speaker is prone to swearing. (BBC News Service, 8 March 2001)

"It is interesting to see how these words figure into conversation when we want to fit in with a certain group. When we want to be like the person we are speaking with, we tend to take on their way of speaking. If we are around someone who peppers their conversation with swear words, we are likely to do the same thing". (BBC News Service, 8 March 2001)

Although almost everyone agrees that swearing is inappropriate, Beer believes that almost everyone also does it. This could be a function of the group listening to the speaker, who would determine whether swearing is inappropriate or not, based on the speaker's and the listener's reaction. These words can be used as a way to identify with a group of people.

"There are times, however, when swearing is inappropriate because they are used in inappropriate environments, for example at work and around superiors. When the speaker swears in these conditions, this is recognized as a "slip"". (BBC News Service, 8 March 2001)

According to the news, sixty boys have been suspended from a secondary school in the past six months for swearing. Paul Templeman-Wright, the head teacher at Beverley secondary school in New Malden claims and hit out about the language of celebrities such as Liam and Noel Gallagher, Jonathan Ross and Elton John. Therefore Templeman-Wright blamed celebrities for spreading 'bad' language.

But language expert Professor Jean Aitchison of Oxford University says the battle against swearing will never be won because language was evolving all the time and swear words had gradually become more common.

"Nowadays, people often use swear words to show they are being friendly, or informal, to show they are not stuck up or pompous. In the past only very low people swore but then it crept across the board. If you listen to children on the street they often don't know what the 'F' or 'C' words mean, they are just trying to send the message across that they are not being pompous." (BBC News Service, 8 March 2001).

5. Referential and emotive meanings of Swear Words

An important distinction in meaning, which has been noted by many writers, concerns the difference between referential and emotive meanings for most swear words. Many words in this area have a specific referent but they have also extended to be used solely to express the attitude of the speaker.

Depending on one's view of meaning as a whole, the status of referential and emotive uses can vary. Jay (1981:30) sees the emotive use as having primacy over referential use, in contradistinction to many others. Staley (1978) goes to the opposite extreme and claims that emotive uses have no "lexical meaning", which only makes sense if it is interpreted as the trivially obvious claim that the meanings in question are not referential. Jakobson (1980:22-23) also claims that swearwords are "zero parts of speech" because the use of them is frequently lost in people whose brain's right hemisphere is inactivated. The fact that this part of the brain also controls emotional reactions (Jakobson 1980:24), which can also be expressed through swearwords, might, however, be an alternative explanation of this fact.

6. Gender variation in swearing

For many decades, women's speech has been seen as being different from that used by men. Stereotyped as swearing less, using less slang, and as aiming for more standard speech style (Hughes, 1992:291).

One such belief is that men swear more than women (see Coates 1986:19-22). Various studies (e.g. Bailey and Timm 1976; Hopper, Coleman & Daly 1980; Oliver & Rubin 1975; Sewell 1984; Staley 1978; Wilson 1975; see also discussion in Coates 1986:109ff.) have in general confirmed this belief, showing men to use swearing more, to be perceived as using it more and to be more comfortable with its use.

The idea that men swear more than women has many supporters. So far, it was never heard that female students uttered swear words. Only male students uttered these words. Recently many sociolinguists say women also utter swear words but it still agrees that the degree and the quantity of the swear words uttered by women are much lower than that of uttered by men.

7. The Importance of Teaching Swear Words

There are some important reasons for teaching students with the material of swear words.

7.1 *Giving the knowledge of Swear Words*

It is better to teach our students with swear words than they would know or learn from films and use the words inappropriately. By giving the knowledge of swear words, the students would know exactly what kind of words have 'very bad/dirty' which probably insults people hearing the words and other knowledge referring to swear words.

7.2 *Swear words make our language more powerful.*

Swearing adds power to whatever we say even if it only makes our feel more powerful. It is the language of powerless, the less powered and disadvantaged. Powerful people use it in anger, to accommodate to less powerful people and to impress (show off their power).

Therefore teaching the swear words to students can empower the students in certain situation (Meckenzie, 1997).

It would probably raise a question that by giving or teaching swear words to the students, they would know much about swear words then in return the students would use the words inappropriately. Giving students the confidence to use swear words appropriately is an important step in teaching these words. Students are treated 'to be wise' in using swear words because they are mature already to choose the good way. It would be different if we teach swear words to lower grade of school such as kindergarten, primary school, and secondary school.

8. Conclusion

Teaching swear words is one way to give the knowledge of the words such as the meaning, the sense, the 'level of insult' and the use of the words which are labelled with 'bad' or 'dirty' or 'four letter words' properly. By knowing the knowledge, students would understand more when hearing swear words in films. They will be more careful to use the words as they have already known the 'power' and the 'insult level' of the words and finally the students will use the swear words properly.®

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