

4-2019

Swearing in a Second Language

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Swearing in a Second Language

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A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Applied Linguistics

Department of English

April 2019

For my friends and family who taught me how to swear

Abstract

Second language learners often lack knowledge of L2 swear words, their appropriateness, and pragmatic function. Competence in L2 swearing is important for L2 learners to be able to express themselves expertly and understand others' emotional expressions precisely. However, taboo language is rarely included explicitly in L2 curricula due to its controversial nature. This paper addresses a gap in the literature concerning what second language users actually know about swearing in their L2. Some studies have attempted to determine learners' receptive swearing competence (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; Kapoor, 2016); however, the present study employs an updated measure of L2 pragmatic swearing competence to investigate the relationship between learners' receptive knowledge in swearing competence and interest in improving this competence. Baseline data from native English speaking participant judgments was used to verify ratings by L2 English learners of the likelihood of swear words to be used in certain contexts in which social distance between interlocutors, tone of the swearing utterance, and the swear word itself have been specified. The L2 English learners also completed a survey indicating their interest in learning about swear words. It was hypothesized that there would be a significant gap between learners' swearing competence and their desire to learn how to swear, offering support that swearing competence has an overlooked value in English L2 classrooms. It was found that there is a weak relationship ($r = -0.19, p = 0.139$) between performance in pragmatic swearing competence and perceived interest in developing swearing knowledge. Implications toward the potential value of teaching L2 swearing competence will be of interest to ESL/EFL teachers and curriculum designers.

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Abbreviations

L1: first language

L2: second language

TOEFL: Test of English as a Foreign Language

Swearing in a Second Language

Introduction and Literature Review

Perhaps one of the most complex phenomena in language is that of swearing. *Swearing* can be defined in many ways and encompasses a great deal of utterances: curses, profanities, blasphemy, taboo words or phrases, obscenities, vulgarities, slang, epithets, insults and slurs, and scatology (Jay, 1992). These terms are often used interchangeably and indeed have presently lost much of their distinction. Mohr (2013) distinguishes between two types of swearing: oaths and obscenities. Oaths are “blasphemous or vain swearing, words or phrases that take God’s name in vain, mention his body parts, or otherwise detract from his honor” (for example, *damn it*) (p. 8). Obscenities, on the other hand, “vividly reveal taboo body parts, actions, and excretions that culture demands we conceal, whether by covering with clothing, shrouding in privacy, or flushing down the toilet” (for example, *shit, fuck*, etc.) (p. 7). In English-speaking countries, oaths used to be more serious or taboo, until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when obscenities took over as the words of choice for catharsis and insults. (Interestingly, in other countries such as Germany and the Nordic countries, oaths are just as or more powerful than obscenities (Ljung, 2011)). Note that, while certainly taboo and offensive, racial slurs are not discussed in this article.

Furthermore, Ljung (2011) describes swearing as having four criteria:

1. Swearing is the use of utterances containing **taboo** words.
2. The taboo words are used with **non-literal** meaning.
3. Many utterances that constitute swearing are subject to severe lexical, phrasal and syntactic constraints which suggest that most swearing qualifies as **formulaic language**.

4. Swearing is **emotive** language: its main function is to reflect, or seem to reflect the speaker's feelings and attitudes.

Ljung is strict with this definition regarding criterion number 2, saying that even an utterance like *Let's fuck!* does not constitute swearing because the meaning of the swear word here is literal, as opposed to something like *That's fucking awesome!* Other researchers agree that the primary meaning of swear words is connotative (e.g., Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). Beers Fägersten (2012) asserts, "Swearing represents a unique case within sociolinguistics in that swear words themselves may have little to no semantic role, but are all the more socially meaningful" (p. 15). However, in her corpus of authentic swearing utterances produced by students at the University of Florida, she does include such literal uses, although she acknowledges that they are less frequent. Lastly, Dewaele (2010) points out that words with the same referents can have different levels of 'offensiveness,' such as different terms for male genitalia.

The prevalent theme in the literature on swearing is that swearing is emotional language. However, the long-held belief that most swearing is used to express anger and frustration (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008) is problematic. Swearing can be classified as either *social* swearing, where the tone is humorous, emphatic, excited, anecdotal, supportive, sarcastic, serious, or surprised, or *annoyance* swearing, the tone being distressed, angry, rebellious, abusive, or desperate (Beers Fägersten, 2012). The term *tone* as used here reflects the speaker's intent and not necessarily the illocutionary effect. Also, annoyance swearing occurs when the speaker is stressed, and social swearing occurs when the speaker is relaxed. Social swearing often helps establish in-group solidarity (Kapoor, 2016). Additionally, social and annoyance swearing can be defined based on the audience of the swearer, and therefore also depends on the speaker's intent: the effect of social swearing depends on who the audience of the speaker is, while annoyance swearing

“constitut[es] a reaction to stress regardless of the audience” (Montagu, 2001, p. 88). Thus, social swearing may be seen as adhering to Bell’s (1984) audience design, whereby speakers’ styles (in this case, their use of swear words) is a response to their audience. In her University of Florida study, Beers Fägersten (2012) found that over half (57%) of the swearing utterances were social, while the rest (43%) were annoyance. Additionally, she found evidence that *social distance* between speakers, and not necessarily the setting or so-called ‘tabooness’ (offensiveness) of a word represents “the single most important contextual variable in use of and reaction to swear word usage” (p. 99). Social distance includes age difference, social status, and gender. Previous research on gender and swearing suggested that women swear a little more than men (Bayard, & Krishnayya, 2001), but Beers Fägersten (2012) found evidence that amount and type of swearing for each gender is highly context specific. For example, men and women swear more in same-sex interactions than in mixed-sex interactions. Additionally, in same-sex interactions for both men and women, *fuck* is more common than *shit*; however, in mixed-sex interactions, women replace *fuck* with the generally less offensive *shit*.

Beers Fägersten’s (2012) *swearing paradox* influenced the instrument of the present study. In the study outlined in her book, she found that although swear words are often thought of as taboo, they are nonetheless used extremely frequently. Applied to second language studies, the topic becomes even more interesting. Native users of the language have a nuanced understanding of when it is appropriate or inappropriate to use certain swear words. How do L2 learners of a language, then, acquire swearing in the L2, especially since this aspect of language knowledge is rarely included in L2 curricula (Liyanage et al., 2015)? Which learners acquire understanding of L2 swearing? At what stages in their general acquisition of the language are

they more proficient in swearing, either receptively or productively? To what extent *do* they acquire swearing knowledge?

The amount of research in the area of second language swearing is slowly increasing, and some have attempted to answer these questions. Dewaele's (2010) book *Emotions in Multiple Languages* is a good introduction to research on L2 swearing as it describes the effects of knowing multiple languages on the type of emotional language that multilinguals use. Through the use of a questionnaire administered online to multilinguals around the world, Dewaele found that, overall, they prefer swearing in either their L1 or dominant language, and that swear words in the L1 are usually felt to have greater emotional force. Additionally, participants reported that they were more likely to swear in a language that they had acquired in a mixed or naturalistic setting (rather than instructional), and they swore more in an L2 if they had acquired it earlier in life. However, Ferré, García, Fraga, Sánchez-Casas, and Molero (2010) found that emotionally-charged words have the same intensity in both participants' L1 and L2. The study used the idea that words that are more emotionally intense are more easily recalled in order to test the emotionality of the same words in two languages for bilinguals. The article presents the findings of four experiments. The first two experiments were controls with monolingual Spanish and Catalan speakers, and the last two were one with 75 Spanish-Catalan bilinguals and one with 35 Spanish-English bilinguals. In experiments (1) and (2), participants had to recall as many words as they could from two lists of 18 words with equal proportions of 'neutral,' 'negative,' and 'positive' words. The words were in the participants' L1. In experiments (3) and (4), the same procedure was used, but one list was in the dominant language of the participant, and the second list was in their L2. In these last two experiments, results showed that emotionally-charged words had the same rate of recall in both languages.

Harris, Ayçiçeği, and Gleason's (2003) study corroborates the findings in Dewaele's (2010) book. Harris et al. (2003) used fingertip electrodes to measure skin conductance in order to gauge the emotional intensity of certain words for Turkish-English bilinguals. 32 native Turkish speakers rated comparable 'positive,' 'aversive,' 'negative,' and taboo words and childhood reprimands in Turkish and English for pleasantness while their electrodermal activity was recorded. Results showed that "taboo words elicited larger skin conductance responses [SCRs] in Turkish than in English, but statistical significance was obtained only when the analysis was restricted to the auditory modality.... Responses to taboo words displayed in the visual modality did not differ between the two languages" (p. 569). Overall, with regards to the other types of words, Harris et al. (2003) concluded that "words in an L1 have a greater emotional resonance than words in an L2" (p. 563).

Such emotional resonance has interesting manifestations. Danet (2013) suggests that multilinguals may choose to swear in their additional languages because the swear words usually sound less offensive than the same expression in their first language. Thus, using the additional language to swear may "cause the participants less guilt or discomfort, and free themselves from punishment" (Chun Nam Mak & Darics, 2017, p. 57). However, the overall theme in Dewaele's (2010) book is that multilinguals mostly prefer to swear in their L1. The participants in Dewaele's (2010) and Danet's (2013) studies were highly competent users of their additional languages and therefore had the option of using those languages to swear. It might be predicted, though, that many second language learners often lack knowledge of L2 swear words, their appropriateness, and pragmatic function. (Indeed, one of the aims of the current study is to determine L2 English learners' pragmatic swearing competence.) Competence in L2 swearing is important for learners to be able to express themselves expertly and understand others' emotional

expressions precisely. However, taboo language is rarely included explicitly in L2 curricula due to its controversial nature (Liyanage, Walker, Bartlett, & Guo, 2015). According to Liyanage et al. (2015), teachers are often simply uncomfortable addressing or teaching taboo language. Thus, very little is being done in the classroom to remedy students' lack of swearing competence.

Rationale: Exploratory Study as Background to Thesis

An exploratory study that I conducted last semester in my sociolinguistics course titled "Influences on Acquisition of Swearing in an L2" provides some evidence that L2 English students have interest in learning about swearing and perceive importance in the teaching of it (Irwin, 2018). The research question of this study was: "What are the factors (e.g., perceptions and attitudes) that influence international ESL students' acquisition of L2 swearing?" Interview questions were designed to investigate how often L2 English speaking university students swear in English, and their familiarity with, attitudes toward, and interest in English swear words. Results from this exploratory study on a limited sample suggested that factors such as the participants' length of studying English, their English-learning context, how much they read, wrote, listened to, and spoke English, whether they were introverted or extraverted, and how often they swore in their L1 together may relate to how often they swore in English.

While such results may have been reasonably expected, interviews revealed interesting insights from the international student participants. A quote from one of the students suggests that there is a gap between L2 English users' knowledge of swear words and their perceived interest in learning about swearing:

"I actually really want to learn more about how to swear because this is kind of knowledge can help me understand this culture, the different culture, and also you have to

understand it. When people maybe want to hurt you, you can understand and also maybe if you have ability to swear you can swear back to, you know, to save your dignity...”

The current study aims to explore this potential gap in L2 competence, which may provide evidence that will contribute to our understanding of the potential importance of teaching swearing in second language classrooms.

Several researchers (e.g., Liyanage et al., 2015; Horan, 2013; Mercury, 1995; Finn, 2017; Dewaele, 2008) offer compelling arguments for teaching swearing in ESL/EFL classrooms. When learners are *not* taught swearing, they are forced to navigate on their own the conventions regarding such language use. Without an explicit guide for this type of language, they are likely to make mistakes, which can have “unexpected and undesirable consequences” (Liyanage et al., p. 114), or they avoid such language altogether, which could deprive them of the ability to express themselves completely. Likewise, Dewaele (2010) argues that “sharing emotions, whether in face-to-face interactions or through written communications, is a crucial social activity, and the ability to do so helps us maintain physical and mental health” (p. 1). Moreover, “communicating emotions in an [additional language] ..., with limited communicative experience, is very hard because as L1 users we are usually able to express our own emotions precisely, and we want to be able to understand other people’s emotions unerringly” (p. 6). Of course, it is important to consider the age of students and the teaching context (ESL versus EFL) when teachers decide whether or not to teach swearing. Just as other ‘taboo’ topics are also avoided in teaching younger learners, teachers should use their discretion to determine at what age learners are mature enough to talk about swearing. Lastly, there may be a more immediate need to learn about swearing in an ESL setting, as learners will likely be constantly exposed to swearing. However, it may also be argued that these learners do not need to be taught swearing,

as they will acquire it naturally. But, as I discuss above, I believe that leaving learners to navigate the conventions of swearing by themselves is doing them a disservice. Finally, in an EFL setting, there may not be as much of an immediate need, but learners will still likely be exposed to swearing (for example, in pop culture) and need to learn how to understand it and not misuse it.

Teaching Swearing versus Teaching about Swearing. A note here is required about the difference between teaching swearing and teaching *about* swearing. The first can be interpreted as teaching productive knowledge, whereas the latter is potentially limited to receptive skill. It is beyond the scope of this project to argue for one or the other or both (indeed, these two different terms are used interchangeably here). Rather, this study (though it focuses on measuring receptive swearing competence) offers support that the topic of swearing should be taught in L2 classrooms in some capacity. Ultimately it will be at the discretion of teachers and curriculum developers to determine what ‘sort’ of teaching—receptive or productive—is included in the classroom. For example, time may be better spent in the classroom teaching receptive competence to students with lower proficiencies, while teachers can venture to teach productive knowledge with more advanced learners

Indeed, it might be hypothesized that L2 learners have more difficulty with appropriate production of swear words than they do with receptive knowledge. (The same may be said of any component of language learning, which explains the frequent comment, “I understand more than I can say.”) Toya and Kodis (1996) studied how Japanese-speaking learners of English expressed anger (and swear words) in English as compared to native speakers of English. Both groups were presented with five situations in which angry responses were expected (thus, this study deals with productive competence). Participants wrote down their responses. Native speakers were

more expressive (e.g., in their use of swear words), while non-native speakers tended to avoid rude language. Interviews with participants revealed that these non-native speakers lacked confidence to use these swear words, and feared miscommunication if they misused them. Whether or not such productive knowledge can actually be taught (versus receptive knowledge) is another question, but language teachers should keep both ideas in mind. Additionally, one should remember that swearing is not primarily used to express anger (annoyance swearing); rather, social swearing is just as, or more, prevalent (Beers Fägersten, 2012). Therefore, social swearing may be more beneficial and perhaps tactful to teach.

Influential Research Informing Present Study

There is little research concerning what second language users *know* about swearing in their L2. Jay and Janschewitz's (2008) study is one of the few investigations into this topic. In this study, native and L2 English learners rated the offensiveness and likelihood of use of various taboo words in hypothetical scenarios. Each scenario specified the speaker (student, dean, or janitor), location (dean's office, dorm room, or parking lot) and the taboo word used (one of nine, each accorded a rating of "tabooness": high, medium or low). The design yielded 81 different scenarios that were included in their questionnaire. One example was: "How likely would it be to hear a dean say 'idiot' in a dorm room?" Findings revealed that the range of "offensiveness" and "likelihood" ratings for the different scenarios was greater for L2 English learners than native speakers, indicating that the L2 English learners' perceptions of appropriateness was not as fine-tuned as that of the native speakers.

A similar study by Kapoor (2016) asked Indian (English, Hindi, or other language as an L1 speakers) and non-Indian participants to rate the appropriateness of mild, moderate, and severe swear words in 'casual' and 'abusive' contexts. The terms *casual* and *abusive* were

adapted from Beers Fägersten's (2012) *social* and *annoyance* swearing. The questionnaire in Kapoor's (2016) study included 12 scenarios developed according to the type of swearing ('casual' or 'abusive') and type of taboo word ('high,' 'medium,' or 'low'), and were presented through dialogue-like sentences. For example, one item was:

X to a friend Y, while drinking some soup: "Oh fuck! I burnt my tongue!"

This would be an example of casual swearing, using what the participants in the study determined was a moderate swear word. Findings revealed that ratings for appropriateness were higher for casual contexts across both genders and nationalities (Indian versus non-Indian). Additionally, female participants found swearing to be less appropriate than their male counterparts in all contexts, and in abusive settings Indian participants found swearing more appropriate than non-Indian participants. Lastly, moderate swear words in casual settings were the least inappropriate, while severe swears in abusive contexts were the most inappropriate.

Potential Moderating Variables in Current Study

Kapoor's (2016) study points to potential moderating variables; cultural differences between English and the Indian participants' native languages potentially influenced the results. This corroborates Ljung's (2011) study, which discusses how swearing in terms of hell and the devil has retained much of its power in Germany and the Nordic countries, whereas words like *hell* and *damn* in English are generally low taboo. Additionally, in a study of Polish EFL speakers, Johnson (1988) found that learners transfer the level of vulgarity from their own language into their additional language. It was found that vulgarisms are much more taboo in Polish culture than in American and British culture, and that these Polish speakers consequently rated taboo words in English as more taboo than their native English-speaking counterparts. An additional potential moderating variable is age. Perceptions of different swear words' strength

can vary from generation to generation (Rathje, 2017). For example, in Rathje's (2014) survey sent out to Danish speakers, 69% of the elderly who responded considered *sgu* ("bloody") a swear word, while only 47% of the young participants considered it a swear word. Also, the use of different *types* of swear words can vary from generation to generation. For example, young Danish people use swear words relating to sexuality and the body's waste products (*fuck, shit*) more than older Danish people. Thus, maybe younger participants (at least, of certain cultures) in the current study would find the use of swear words in certain situations more likely than older participants. The presence of English swear words in the cultures of other languages may also affect the English swearing proficiency of those L2 learners of English. For example, in the second half of the twentieth century, the number of English swear words in Danish increased significantly (Rathje, 2017). (In the above example with Danish-speakers, *fuck* and *shit* are English words used in Danish.) Therefore, Danish-speaking English learners may have a better understanding of how to use those swear words in socially acceptable ways. But, of course there is the possibility that the usage of such swear words differs between the two cultures. Also, how *much* people swear in their L1 or L2, how much they use their L2 in general, and how they feel about swearing in general may affect their swearing competence (Irwin, 2018). Such possible moderating variables were considered in the development of the survey for the current study. For example, L2 learners of English were asked their L1 and age, how much they use English on a daily or weekly basis, as well as: "How often do you swear in your first language?" and "How often do you swear in English?" These were not the main concerns of the study, as the aim was to establish whether there was a relationship between pragmatic competence and interest in developing this competence, but these questions were included to potentially help explain in future studies any interesting or unexpected results.

Toya and Kodis's (1996) description of the differences between anger expression in English-speaking cultures (in this case, American) and Japanese culture are useful in explaining another potential moderating variable in the current study. In Western society, people, especially men, are much more likely to show anger than those in Japanese society when exposed to situations that warrant angry responses. It may actually be expected for American men to show anger, whereas showing anger in Japanese culture is seen as "immature" and "childish," and a way to "lose face" (Toya & Kodis, 1996, p. 281). Such differences in behavior may account for differences between the results of the swearing test in the current study for native speakers of English and East Asian non-native speaker participants. For scenarios that illustrate annoyance swearing, their perceptions of whether or not this is likely or appropriate may differ. Thus, again it is important to know the nationality of non-native speaker participants in order to help explain any unexpected results.

Jay and Janschewitz (2008) and Kapoor's (2016) studies are steps in the right direction toward developing an instrument that can lend an understanding of how participants rank the likelihood/offensiveness/appropriateness of different swearing utterances based on the context. However, more recent research (e.g., Beers Fägersten, 2012) begs a reconsideration of certain conceptualizations and terminology used in Jay and Janschewitz (2008) and Kapoor (2016). The choice of terms to describe swearing may be problematic when it is defined as either polite or impolite, offensive or inoffensive, rude or not rude, or aggressive or non-aggressive. This approach labels taboo words as *inherently* impolite or offensive, though it can be argued that in most contexts of usage, judgments of impoliteness or offensiveness are highly subjective: "Language can first be deemed vulgar, foul, bad, etc. only within a social context in which speaker, listener, setting, topic, and other variables—particularly participant reactions—are taken

into consideration” (Beers Fägersten, 2012, p. 3). In adapting Beers Fägersten’s (2012) social/annoyance distinction but labeling annoyance swearing as ‘abusive,’ Kapoor (2016) also oversimplifies the complexity of annoyance swearing. Jay and Janschewitz (2008) and Kapoor (2016) also take for granted the “tabooness” of the swear words used in their studies. Jay and Janschewitz (2008) accept the “tabooness” of individual swear words based on previous studies in which these words were judged out of context: “The goal of the present study was to show that native speakers’ judgments about the appropriateness of taboo language are informed by the *tabooness of the particular word used* as well as the speaker and location of the utterance” (p. 276; emphasis added). Kapoor (2016) allowed his own participants to rate the offensiveness of certain words, which is how he developed his stratification of taboo words, but these words were still judged out of context. Beers Fägersten (2012) found that swear words cannot be judged out of context because their meaning is primarily derived from the context in which they are used. Additionally, Jay and Janschewitz’s (2008) measure neglects one key aspect of the swearing utterance: the listener, focusing only on speaker, location, and swear word used. Kapoor’s (2016) instrument is a marked improvement, as it also includes the type (‘casual’ or ‘abusive’) of swearing (although with its own limitations, as described above).

The current study seeks to further improve this type of measure by introducing another set of variables: the degree of closeness of social distance between the speaker and the listener. (Jay and Janschewitz (2008) identify the importance of social distance as well, but they did not explicitly incorporate it into their questionnaire.)

Research Questions

The current study aims to measure what L2 speakers know about swearing in English and identify the potential gap between this competence and their interest in developing it. More

specifically, it asks: When given scenarios in which the speaker, listener, and swear word utterance and tone are specified, how similar or dissimilar are the likelihood ratings of the L2 English learners compared to those of native speakers? How does the swearing performance of the L2 English learners relate to their interest in developing swearing competence? Thus, the potentially moderating variable is L2 English users' perceived interest in developing competence in swearing, and the dependent variable is their actual swearing competence. The research questions are:

1. How does the swearing competence of L2 English learners compare to native speaker swearing behavior?
2. To what extent is there a relationship between L2 English learners' pragmatic competence in swearing and their interest in developing such competence?

I hypothesized that the L2 English learners would not have as nuanced an understanding of when it is or is not appropriate to swear when compared to native speakers. Also, I hypothesized that there would be a gap between learners' interest in developing pragmatic knowledge in swearing and their actual swearing competence, resulting in a negative correlation between the two variables.

Methods

Participants

Intermediate level or higher L2 English learners were invited to participate in this study. Native speakers of English were also invited to participate to serve as a baseline against which to compare the swearing performance of L2 English learners.

Participants were recruited online. The questionnaire was developed using Google Forms, and was emailed to acquaintances of mine and posted on my Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter. (The message posted to social media is in Appendix F.) Additionally, I contacted administrators of several Facebook groups dedicated to helping ESL learners learn English. Administrators of three groups agreed to post links to the surveys (for both native and non-native speakers of English) on their pages. Also, emails were sent to international students at Grand Valley State University, asking them to participate.

IRB approval was acquired before the questionnaire was administered. In the consent information (Appendix G), participants were warned of the nature of the questionnaire (i.e., that it includes swear words) and were informed that they had the right not to continue with it at any moment. It was stated that the questionnaire would take approximately 30 minutes to complete.

Native Speakers. In the recruitment materials, native speakers and non-native speakers of English were directed to their respective surveys (see Appendix F). I used the phrases: “If you consider yourself a *native speaker* of English, please take this survey; and: If you consider yourself a *non-native speaker* or *learner* of English, please take this survey.” The purpose of this wording was to anticipate the fact that not all ‘native’ speakers of English are from inner circle countries (Kachru, 1985). Many Indian English speakers, for example, consider English to be

(one of) their L1s. However, the results of the demographic questions indicated that all native speaker participants were from inner circle countries.

A total of 69 native speakers participated in the survey. Their ages varied from 18 to 82, but a majority of them were in their twenties (47 participants, or 68%, were between the ages of 21 and 29). This is likely because I targeted a convenience sample of friends and fellow university students, who also helped through snowball sampling. The mean age was 29 years old and the mode was 24.

52 native English speaking participants were female (75%), while 15 were male (22%), and two (3%) were either non-binary or gender-queer. A majority of participants currently live in the U.S., while a minority (three, or 4%) live in the United Kingdom, three live in Japan (4%), and two (3%) live in South Korea.

Non-native Speakers. The focus of the current study is on intermediate level or higher L2 *learners* of English, and therefore there were certain inclusion requirements. It was thought that beginning level learners would not understand enough of the survey in order to complete the task at hand, and thus would alter the results of the study. Also, I wished to exclude responses from participants who are not *learners* of English anymore; maybe they studied English for a while, but currently do not use it and do not seek to improve it. Or, maybe they do use English regularly, but consider themselves advanced enough to a point where they feel they do not need to improve anymore. Two questions were used to exclude participants who did not meet these requirements; one asked them to self-rate their proficiency level. If they rated themselves as *High Beginning* or *Low Beginning*, the survey ended with the message: “Thank you for participating, but you do not meet the requirements for this survey. If you are a native speaker of English, please take the native speaker version of this survey (see original links). If you are a

non-native speaker of English below an intermediate level of proficiency, thank you for your interest, but we will not need your responses.” The second question asked: “Do you have a desire to continue to improve your English in general? In other words, do you still consider yourself a learner of English?” If they responded “No” (which only one participant did), then they were excluded from the analysis.

37 non-native speakers of English participated in the survey. 20 participants (54%) were female, while 17 (46%) were male. Their ages ranged from 18 to 51, but, similarly to the native speaker baseline sample, a majority were in their twenties (27 participants, or 73%, were between the ages of 21 and 29). The mean age was 27 years old and the mode was 23.

Nationalities of non-native speakers varied greatly, with participants from 23 countries. The most frequent nationalities included Vietnamese (four participants, 11%) and Saudi, Mexican, and Indian (three participants at 8% each) (see Appendix A).

For the most part, English L2 learners’ first language corresponds to their nationality (see Appendix B). The most frequent L1 was Spanish (11 participants, or 30%), followed by Vietnamese (4 participants, or 11%). Arabic, French, and Portuguese were the L1s of 3 participants each (8%). The following L1s were representative of one participant: Chinese, Finnish, Gujarati, Korean, Malay, Norwegian, Telugu, Turkish, and Yoruba.

A majority (25, or 64%) of participants characterized themselves as advanced speakers of English, while nine (23%) self-selected as high-intermediate, and three (8%) as low-intermediate (None selected beginning). 36 participants (97%) selected that they still considered themselves learners of English, while one (3%) said “No.” The responses of this participant were excluded from further analysis, as this did not meet inclusion requirements (see Instrument section).

Table 1

Distribution of Proficiency Levels of English Language Learner Participants

Proficiency Level	Frequency	Percent
Advanced	25	64.10
High-intermediate	9	23.08
Low-intermediate	3	7.69

Instrument

The questionnaire completed by NSs contains one section: the swearing test (see Appendix C), described below. The L2 English learners' questionnaire contains three parts: the same swearing test as the NSs, questions concerning interest in and attitudes toward English swearing (Appendix D), and a short demographic survey (Appendix E).

The “swearing test” makes up the bulk of the questionnaire for both native speakers and L2 English learners. (Note: in all recruitment materials, the “test” is referred to as a “survey,” in order to not discourage people from participating.) This measure draws closely from previous tests of pragmatic swearing competence developed by Jay and Janschewitz (2008) and Kapoor (2016), but makes more explicit certain factors of the swearing utterance that have been shown to be critical, such as social distance between interlocutors, type of swearing (social — with tones humorous, emphatic, excited, anecdotal, supportive, sarcastic, serious, and surprised or annoyance—with the tones distressed, angry, rebellious, abusive, and desperate), and tabooess of the swear word (Beers Fägersten, 2012). This instrument also excludes scenarios judged to be inauthentic, like some of the items in Jay and Janschewitz's (2008) questionnaire (e.g., “How likely would it be to hear a dean say ‘idiot’ in a dorm room?” Why would a dean be in a dorm room?). The factors specified in each scenario in the test include social distance, type of

swearing, and tabooeness of the swear word used. Thus, it is a 4 X 2 X 3 design, resulting in 24 total items, illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2

Design of Swearing Test

Social Distance Level	Type Of Swearing (Tone)	Tabooeness Of Swear Word
3 (Closest Social Distance)	social (humorous, emphatic, excited, anecdotal, supportive, sarcastic, serious, and surprised)	High (<i>fuck, cunt, shit</i>)
2	annoyance (distressed, angry, rebellious, abusive, and desperate)	Medium (<i>ass, bitch, dick</i>)
1		Low (<i>hell, damn, bastard</i>)
0 (Furthest Social Distance)		

An analysis of the first scenario on the survey will serve to illustrate the way the variables were combined. The scenario is: Two female friends in their early thirties are speaking together at a bar. One is telling a funny story, and when she finishes, the other says, laughing: “That’s fucking hilarious!”

For item 1, the following formula generates the scenario:

$$3 \quad x \quad \text{social} \quad x \quad \text{fuck}$$

Which means:

$$\text{Social distance (3)} \quad x \quad \text{Type (social)} \quad x \quad \text{Tabooeness (high; fuck)}$$

The **3** indicates high similarities between the speaker and listener in the scenario with regards to age, social status, and gender, thus indicating a close social distance. **Social** is the type of swearing used in that scenario, utilizing one or more of the tones (emphatic or supportive) specified in Table 2. **Fuck** is the representative swear word of the high-tabooeness words (in later

questions, each representative swear word was used in exchange with two other swear words in the same taboo level). The context of the swearing utterance in question 1 is explicit: the social distance is close between the interlocutors (age and gender are specified as the same, and social status is implied to be similar); the tone is social (the speaker is laughing, so the tone is humorous); and though the swear word is high taboo, the context makes it probable that this scenario Very likely.

Further permutations of the variables in Table 2 generate the rest of the 24 scenarios (see Appendix C). Participants were asked to rate the likelihood of the swearing utterance in response to the situation to demonstrate their pragmatic swearing competence.

Unlike Jay and Janschewitz's (2008) scenarios, the location of each swearing utterance is not always specified. However, the beginning of the questionnaire lists one stipulation: "In all situations, only the speaker and the listener mentioned are able to hear the conversation and therefore hear the swear word. In other words, the conversations are private between the two people." Though some studies have found that "swearing in public is not an infrequent act" (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008), Beers Fägersten (2012) found evidence that much swearing is done in private settings. Thus, there are no "overhearers" (Bell, 1984) who may affect the speaker's use of swear words.

Additionally, a few more specifications of the questionnaire design are needed. In the questionnaire, participants have to rate how *likely* each scenario is. They are not asked to rate *offensiveness* or *appropriateness* (e.g., Kapoor (2016)), since, as discussed above, it gives the impression that swear words are inherently offensive or inappropriate. Using *likelihood* (following Jay and Janschewitz (2008)) helps neutralize this impression and retains focus on appropriateness relative to context. Also, this questionnaire uses the so-called *tabooness* of the

swear words (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). While this intrinsic classification of individual swear words could be problematic (as it could be argued that tabooeness is necessarily tied to context), the present design incorporates tabooeness, as determined in previous research, as a means to justify the selection of swear words to include in the test. The nine swear words selected to be used in this study were ones that had been found to be commonly cited in swearing research (Beers Fägersten, 2012). Tabooeness for these words were categorized as either high, medium, or low tabooeness based on previous research that found that sexual terms in English are generally rated most offensive, followed by excretory terms which, in turn, are typically judged more offensive than sacred terms (Beers Fägersten, 2012). In fact, “Specifically, *fuck*, *shit*, *cunt* and *motherfucker* (in varying orders) have been rated as the most offensive” (Beers Fägersten, 2012, p. 8).

If each of the nine common swear words were weighted equally, then the design would be $4 \times 2 \times 9$, yielding 72 scenarios. Instead, this study has three categories in its third dimension, and different swear words from those categories replace the “representative” one to add variety to the questionnaire. *Hell*, *ass*, and *fuck* are used the most often because they were randomly chosen as representative swear words of their respective tabooeness level. Also, *fuck* was found to be more frequently used than *cunt* and *shit* (Beers Fägersten, 2012), which is reflected in its frequency in the questionnaire. *Bastard*, *bitch*, *dick*, and *cunt* were not used as frequently because they are gendered terms, and therefore might skew the results if participants found them more ‘offensive’ (or less likely) due to this fact. Table 3 shows how many times each swear word is used in the test.

Table 3

Number of Times Each Swear Word is Used in Swearing Test

	Low Taboo Words			Medium taboo words			High taboo words		
	<i>hell</i>	<i>damn</i>	<i>bastard</i>	<i>ass</i>	<i>bitch</i>	<i>dick</i>	<i>fuck</i>	<i>cunt</i>	<i>shit</i>
# of times word is used in swearing test	5	2	1	6	1	1	6	1	1

It is important to note that all of the scenarios in the swearing test involve spoken instances of swearing. However, there is evidence that written swearing is increasing, especially through computer-mediated communication (CMC). Several studies have examined swearing in CMC in bilinguals (Chun Num Mak & Darics, 2017; Danet, 2013), and their findings may have implications for the current study. Danet (2013) bases her analysis of her written data on several points drawn from the literature on linguistic impoliteness:

1. Only speakers or writers are polite or impolite, not speech acts or linguistic forms, whose interpretation may vary widely from one situation to another.
2. Rudeness is “constituted by deviation from whatever counts as polite in a given social context, is inherently confrontational and disruptive to social equilibrium” (Kasper, 1990, p. 208).
3. One should focus not only on the impoliteness of individual contributions but on negotiation regarding impolite behavior over time and primarily on seriously intended, strategic rudeness.

Point 1 relates to the idea that use of rude language, or abusive language in the case of the present study, is largely context-dependent (Beers Fägersten, 2012). Linguistic forms (i.e., swear words) are not inherently polite or impolite; rather, it is the intention of the speaker and the

situation that determine their meaning. Thus, the same is true in both written, CMC, and in spoken language.

Six statements (see Appendix D) about L2 English learners' interest in learning English swearing were also included in the questionnaire. The instructions are: **Select to what degree you agree or disagree with the following statements.** Two example questions are:

1. I would benefit from a better understanding of how to swear in English.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

2. I already know what I need to know about swear words and how they're used in English.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

Thus, these questions attempted to gauge L2 English learner participants' interest in developing swearing knowledge.

Data Analysis

Quantitative. English native speakers' responses to the swearing test were used as a baseline against which to measure how L2 English learners performed on the same swearing test. The majority response for the native speakers for each of the 24 scenarios was determined, and this was established as the 'correct' response. Any L2 English learner who selected the 'correct' response received a score of two points for that scenario. If their response was on the same side of the spectrum (i.e., the correct response was "Very likely" and they chose "Likely"), they received one point. If they chose any option opposite the 'correct' answer, they received zero points. As an example, the following scenario is analyzed:

Two female friends in their early thirties are speaking together at a bar. One is telling a funny story, and when she finishes, the other laughs and says:

"That's fucking hilarious!"

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

For this scenario, a majority (69.6%) of native speakers rated it as Very likely. Therefore, if an L2 English learner responded Very likely (the ‘correct’ response), they received two points. If they responded Likely, they received one point. If they responded Very unlikely or Unlikely, they received zero points (See Table 4). The maximum number of points an L2 English learner participant could score was therefore 48 (a maximum of two points for each of the 24 scenarios).

Table 4

Frequency of Different NS Responses and Corresponding Points Awarded to L2 English Learners

Two female friends in their early thirties are speaking together at a bar...

Possible Responses	Very unlikely	Unlikely	Likely	Very likely
Frequency	1.4%	2.9%	26.1%	69.6%
Points Awarded	0 points	0 points	1 point	2 points

Additionally, L2 learners of English were assigned a score based on the statements gauging their interest in learning about swearing (i.e., I would benefit from a better understanding of how to swear in English). Strongly disagree received one point, Disagree received two points, Agree received three points, and Strongly agree received four points, for a maximum of 24 points total (item 2 was reverse coded because it was negatively worded). Therefore, the higher the participant’s score, the greater their interest in learning about swearing in English.

Correlation analysis was used to explore the potential relationship between L2 English learner participants' overall perception of importance of learning swear word competence and their overall swearing competence scores. I checked assumptions for running Pearson's correlation: data for both variables appear to be relatively normally distributed (see Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1

Distribution of Swearing Score

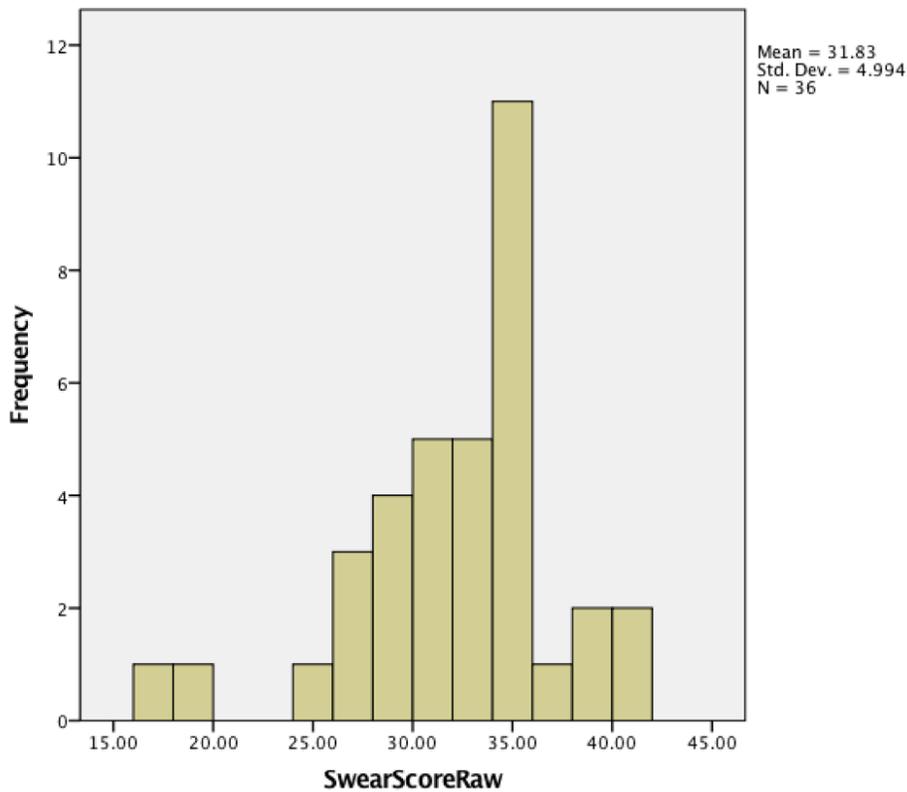
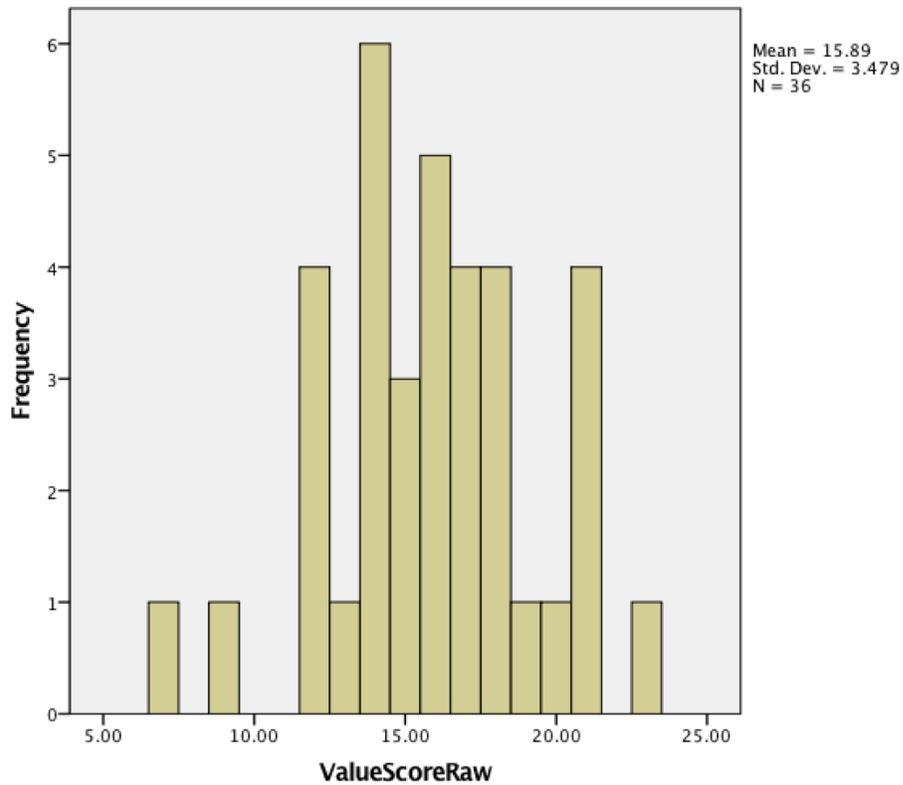


Figure 2

Distribution of Scores Gauging Interest in Learning about Swearing



Qualitative. The L2 English learners’ open-ended responses to the questions “How do you feel about your ability to swear in English? Is it important to you to have knowledge about swearing in English? Why/why not” were analyzed using content analysis. I recorded key words and themes that appeared in these responses, and kept tallies of when the themes were repeated. The results are reported below.

Results

Quantitative Findings

On the swearing test as a whole, the L2 English learners scored on average 31.83 (66.32%) points out of 48 possible points, with a standard deviation of 4.99. For the scores for interest in learning to swear, L2 English learner participants scored an average of 15.89 (66.2%) out of 24 possible points, with a standard deviation of 3.48.

Table 5

Overall Scores for Swearing Competence and Interest in Learning to Swear

Mean swearing test score out of 48 points	Percent	SD	Mean score for interest in learning to swear out of 24 points	Percent	SD
31.83	66.32%	4.99	15.89	66.2%	3.48

The maximum number of points per item an L2 English learner participant could score on the swearing test was 2 (they selected a point in the Likert scale that matched the most frequent selection by native speakers). Table 6 reports the mean scores of the learners' responses to the scenarios organized by type of swearing, social distance, and tabooess. The participants seemed to perform equally well on scenarios regardless of whether it was social or annoyance swearing. They did best when the social distance was very far between interlocutors, and when the swear word used was high or low taboo. Thus, they had the most trouble with relatively closer social distances and medium taboo swear words. This could be expected, as these categories represent more nuanced, less extreme cases of swear word use.

Table 6

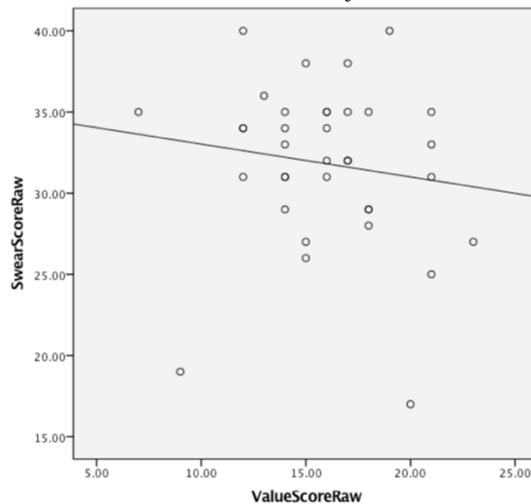
L2 English Learner Performance on Swearing Test by Each Dimension of Design

		M	SD
Type of Swearing	Social	1.33	0.45
	Annoyance	1.32	0.23
Social Distance	3 (Closest)	1.19	0.25
	2	1.28	0.50
	1	1.13	0.19
	0 (Furthest)	1.50	0.26
Tabooness	High	1.40	0.18
	Medium	1.19	0.43
	Low	1.39	0.33

A correlation analysis was run to explore the potential relationship between L2 English learner participants’ overall perception of importance of learning swear word competence and their overall swearing competence scores. It was found that there is a weak negative relationship ($r = -0.19, p = 0.139$) between participants’ swearing competence and perceived interest in developing swearing knowledge, meaning that low swearing competence had a weak relationship with perceived interest in learning swearing, although not significant (see Figure 3 for a visual representation with a scatterplot diagram).

Figure 3

Correlation between Score for Interest in Learning to Swear and Swear Score



Additionally, the likelihood ratings of the different scenarios differed greatly depending on the design of the scenario (i.e., the social distance between the speakers, the type of swearing, and the tabooeness of the swear word used) for both native speakers of English and L2 learners of English, which corroborates other researchers' findings (e.g., Beers Fägersten, 2012; Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; & Kapoor, 2016) who found that likelihood of swearing is highly contextually variable. However, similar to the results found in Jay and Janschewitz (2008), the frequency of responses varied more for L2 learners of English than they did for native speakers. For example, see Table 7 for the native speaker and L2 English learner responses to the example scenario with two female friends speaking together at a bar (item 1 of the swearing test).

Table 7

Comparing Native Speaker and L2 English Learner Responses to Item 1 of Swearing Test

Response	<i>Very unlikely</i>	<i>Unlikely</i>	<i>Likely</i>	<i>Very likely</i>
Native Speaker	1.4%	2.9%	26.1%	69.6%
L2 English learner	2.7%	10.8%	43.2%	43.2%

Lower departure from the preferred response (Very Likely) for the native speaker group suggests the above hypothesis that native speakers have a more nuanced understanding of when it is and is not appropriate to swear.

Qualitative Findings

Several themes were revealed in the open-ended answers to the questions: “How do you feel about your ability to swear in English? Is it important to you to have knowledge about swearing in English? Why/why not?” These themes are explored in the subheadings below. (In the quotes, original spelling and punctuation are maintained.)

It is important to understand swearing in order to aid in communication. Nine participants (25%) wrote a comment related to this theme. For example, they wrote:

- (a) To help clarify information better and avoid communication breakdown
- (b) I am glad I understand swearing in English but more to understand others than for to use it myself.
- (c) Is important for to know how to do because you might offend someone or you might not understand when people is joking
- (d) I rarely swear in English. However, I think it's important as I could understand pragmatic aspects in conversations, and probably feel more confident while communicating with different kinds of people.
- (e) Because that way I can identify when someone is either offending me in a bad way, joking or if it is simply a normal expression. It will also be important so I know when and how to use them when needed and to not use it during an inappropriate moment/way. I have been offended in the past without even realizing what they are telling me.
- (f) Swearing is natural in almost all languages and everyone has to know them even not using them.
- (g) I'm in a good place with it. I know what they mean and how to use them but I prefer not to.. It's important to me to know if people around me are trying to offend me or not.

Thus, these participants acknowledged that receptive knowledge of swearing, and not necessarily productive knowledge, is important.

Swearing is important for fitting in. About eight participants (22%) wrote a comment related to this theme. For example, several responses were the following:

- (h) I feel freakin' good about it. It helps in blending in a group. The more your language is similar, the more you will be accepted by a group, as long as your language feels natural and you don't over do it.
- (i) I think I have a good level of swearing in english and I think is important to learn because it look like english native speaker swear a lot in every context
- (j) Helps to build up my communication skills and maintain healthy relationships with others
- (k) [...] show intimacy with people (I swear with the closed ones only).

For these participants, therefore, swearing was important for achieving in-group solidarity.

Swearing is natural and normal. About eight participants (22%) wrote a comment related to this theme. For example, several comments were the following:

- (l) Swearing is natural in almost all languages [...]
- (m) I consider swearing as a part of the culture and idiosyncrasy of a country.
- (n) efficient - it's important because I think swearing has becoming more common as a way of expressing our feelings

Swearing allows expression of emotion. About four participants (6%) had a comment related to this theme. They wrote:

- (o) It is the reflections of real feelings.
- (p) Over the years, my ability to swear has increased. No longer are they classroom jokes but actual expressions of emotion at a higher degree of authenticity with social clarity. It is important for me to relate to others and to ground myself in their shoes. I also swear I'm Spanish more frequently if I express an emotion I'd rather not have anyone else understand.
- (q) Since English is used in all kind of scenarios, not only in work/school, swearing might be useful while going out with friends or while having an argument. (To fully express yourself, sometimes just a swearing shows more than normal words)
- (r) I believe I have a good knowledge of swearing in English. It's important because sometimes the expression of swearing helps me show my emotion (angry, pain, shock, etc) when I can't find the right word at the moment.

These comments relate back to the overarching theme found in the literature on swearing: that swearing is emotional language.

Additional marginal themes. Some participants do not swear for specific reasons: one said they were against swearing because it was, "Disgusting for straight. I do have ability to understand swearing in English, I'd but be offended, but I personally prefer not to reflect the same. It's against my standards." Another said, "Swearing is typical between teenagers but it is unnecessary in most cases," implying that they do not swear and view it negatively. One female

participant said that she does not swear because of her profession, and another woman said that she does not swear because it is generally not acceptable for women to swear in her culture. Related to the theme of culture, one other participant said that their L1 culture affected their swearing in English: “I’m Finnish and we have a big swearing culture, so I feel like it helps me get understood better when I can ‘power up’ words with swearing, and it helps me feel more like myself when talking in english.” Only a few participants mentioned their ability and tendency to actually (productively) swear in English; the majority referred only to a receptive competence.

Discussion

This study sought to determine if there was a gap between L2 English learner participants' pragmatic swearing knowledge in English and their interest in developing such competence. Specifically, the research questions were:

1. To what extent is there a relationship between English L2 learners' pragmatic competence in swearing and their interest in developing such competence?
2. How does the swearing competence of L2 English learners compare to native speaker swearing behavior?

I hypothesized that the L2 English learners would not have as nuanced an understanding of when it is or is not appropriate to swear when compared to native speakers, which can be suggested based on a descriptive analysis of the data. Also, I hypothesized that there would be a gap between learners' interest in developing pragmatic knowledge in swearing and their actual swearing competence, resulting in a negative correlation between the two variables. The results suggested such a negative relationship, although weak and only approaching statistical significance. Therefore, it appears that the less swearing competence L2 learners of English have, the greater their interest may be in learning about swearing. These results were somewhat expected, but a stronger negative relationship between the two variables was hypothesized (for possible explanations, see Limitations and Future Research Directions below).

It is difficult to compare the present study to existing research because no previous research has analyzed the same variables in the same way. Studies similar to the present study (i.e., Jay & Janschewitz, 2008 and Kapoor, 2016) were concerned with simply comparing native and nonnative speakers' swearing ability. The current study goes one step further to try to

determine if there is an interest in developing swearing knowledge in relation to lack of L2 pragmatic swearing competence.

The qualitative results were perhaps more revealing than the quantitative results in the present study. Of those who responded to the item: “How do you feel about your ability to swear in English? Is it important to you to have knowledge about swearing in English? Why/why not?”, the majority wrote comments that indicated that they perceived swearing in English as important and normal; few comments indicated the opposite. And while some mentioned that they already felt confident swearing in English, others said they wished they could learn more.

The first theme, that it is important to understand swearing in order to aid in communication, brings us back to the excellent quote in Dewaele (2010): “communicating emotions in an [additional language], i.e. with limited communicative experience, is very hard because as L1 users we are usually able to express our own emotions precisely, and we want to be able to understand other people’s emotions unerringly” (p. 6). Moreover, “An inaccurate or incomplete understanding of the emotionality and valence of an emotion word, or an emotion-laden word, in the LX might have unwanted illocutionary effects (Sbisa, 2001), which might be far more embarrassing than phonological, morphological or syntactical errors (Dewaele, 2008b)” (p.7). The participants in the present study easily identified communication and receptive knowledge of swearing as important as well.

The second theme, that swearing is important for fitting in, has been hinted at in previous literature (Dewaele, 2010; Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). This is related more to a productive knowledge of swearing, however. Toya and Kodis (1996) studied such productive knowledge when they presented native English speakers and L1 Japanese English learners with scenarios where anger was expected and allowed them to write a reaction to the scenario. Here it was

found that these non-native speakers lacked confidence to use swear words, and feared miscommunication if they misused them. Thus, this relates back to the theme of swearing being important for communication, and also indicates that productive swearing requires a high level of proficiency and confidence in order to be done effectively.

That swearing is natural and normal is found in Jay and Janschewitz (2008). They discuss the neurological factors that affect swearing, and contend that “we are not always able to control swearing; emotions arise involuntarily” (p. 271). Thus, this in turn also relates to the final, overarching theme: that swearing allows expression of emotion. Again, there is an excellent quote by Dewaele (2010) that illustrates this: “Sharing emotions, whether in face-to-face interactions or through written communications, is a crucial social activity, and the ability to do so helps us maintain physical and mental health” (p. 1).

These four themes are so entwined with each other that it is sometimes difficult to differentiate examples of them. It could be summarized, though, that the participants in the present study found swearing to be normal and important. These qualitative results seem in line with the quantitative results; most of the learners were at the advanced level, which reflects the high proficiency needed to produce swear words effectively in order to, for example, fit in with others. And while the majority of the comments indicated that they thought swearing was important, perhaps they were at such a high level of swearing competence that they did not indicate their interest in continuing to *learn* about swearing in the interest statements part of the questionnaire. This corroborates the quantitative results: that the greater their pragmatic swearing competence, the lower their interest in learning about swearing.

Limitations

There are several limitations that could have influenced the swearing performance of the L2 English learner participants, one being their English proficiency. This seems like the most obvious moderating variable, and could have affected the results of this study. A majority of the participants (64.1%) identified themselves as advanced learners of English. It might be expected that these learners performed better on the swearing test, influencing the results overall.

Additionally, many of the participants were international students living in the U.S., who are likely to have greater exposure to English swearing and therefore likely performed well on the swearing test relative to potential participants from other proficiencies and backgrounds.

It would be interesting to see how the results would change if a greater range of proficiencies from a variety of contexts (more than twenty-somethings living in the U.S.) participated.

Future Research Directions

There are several variables that could be analyzed in future research in relation to L2 English learner participants' swearing proficiency, nationality being one. In the current study it was asked of participants what their nationality was, but to avoid too many statistical tests in one study, this variable was not analyzed in relation to swearing performance. However, L1 culture became relevant in some of the qualitative results; one participant mentioned their "big swearing culture" in Finnish and how that influenced their tendency to swear in English. Another mentioned she does not swear, because in her culture it is not acceptable for women to swear.

Perhaps another open-ended question could be added to a future survey, similar to ones asked in my (2018) exploratory study in which I interviewed international students at my university, such as: Do you swear in your first language? Or: How do you think your culture affects your tendency to swear in English? Such comparisons between L1 and L2 swearing behavior would

be similar to Dewaele (2010), whose findings suggest that L1 swearing behavior does affect L2 swearing behavior, and Kapoor (2016), who found that, in his context, Indians are less likely to use English swear words than non-Indians.

Additionally, the ages of participants were collected. Again, however, this variable was not analyzed. It is possible, though, that age affects *how* (Rathje, 2017), *how well*, and *how much* an individual swears in their L1 and L2 (Irwin, 2018). For example, as discussed above, perceptions of *what* constitutes a swear word can vary between generations (Rathje, 2017). Also, keeping in mind the limited sample size of my (2018) study, it was found that younger speakers may swear more than older speakers.

As mentioned above, it was suggested in the present study and has been suggested in others (e.g., Bayard & Krishnayya, 2001; Beers Fägersten, 2012) that gender affects the swearing behavior of individuals. Future studies could examine how men and women of different L1 backgrounds change their swearing behavior, for example, in mixed-sex interactions (Beers Fägersten, 2012).

I found in Irwin (2018) that exposure to pop culture seemed to increase English swearing in international students. Future studies could analyze to what degree frequency of using English to read, write, speak, and listen affects swearing performance of L2 English learners.

In the end, there are a number of variables that could have (and likely did) influence the results of this study. I was concerned with examining the relationship between interest in learning swearing and performance in English swearing, but in the future it could be analyzed to what extent any one of the aforementioned variables are related to performance in swearing.

Conclusions

The present study offers some implications for teaching and future research. The results suggest that there may be some need to help those who lack L2 swearing competence in English; these learners indicated some interest in developing this competence (and slightly more interest than those who demonstrated more developed swearing competence). Therefore, it could be argued that English swearing should be taught in some capacity in language classrooms, and perhaps this argument would become stronger after further research. However, it is of course necessary to be aware that there are socio-cultural factors that affect when swearing can or should be taught; in some cultures, for example in Saudi Arabia, swearing is completely inappropriate in an educational context. Additionally, teaching swearing would not be relevant in a TOEFL preparation course. Nonetheless, when an L2 learner is living in the U.S., perhaps, for example, participating in a graduate program, it is important for them to acquire at least receptive competence in swearing so that they can satisfy their interest in doing so, understand situations better in which swear words are used, and fit in more with peers.

Future research could attempt to attract more participants to respond to the same survey and analyze the same variables as the present study to see if there will be a stronger relationship between English swearing competence and interest in developing that competence. Additionally, other moderating variables could be analyzed in more depth, such as L1 culture, age, gender, exposure to English, and English proficiency, to study to what extent these variables are related to performance in swearing.

As has been revealed in this paper and in other literature (i.e., Beers Fägersten, 2012), swearing is incredibly common in English and is seen as normal and important. Studies like the present one are important because not only is swearing an “idiosyncrasy” of a country, but can

also be incredibly difficult for L2 learners. The present study is a step toward identifying a need to remedy a possible lack in pragmatic swearing knowledge in some learners. If this need can be corroborated in future research, then it will be clear to English language teachers, administrators, and curriculum designers that actions need to be taken to help these learners.

Appendix A

Nationalities of English L2 learner participants

Nationality	Frequency	Percent
Vietnamese	4	10.81
Indian	3	8.11
Mexico	3	8.11
Saudi	3	8.11
Brazilian	2	5.41
El Salvador	2	5.41
French	2	5.41
Hispanic (current U.S. residents)	2	5.41
Honduran	2	5.41
China	1	2.70
Colombia	1	5.41
Finnish	1	2.70
Indonesian	1	2.70
Korean	1	2.70
Kurdish	1	2.70
Malaysian	1	2.70
Nigeria	1	2.70
Norwegian	1	2.70
Portuguese	1	2.70

Canada (Quebec)	1	2.70
Romania	1	2.70
Spanish	1	2.70
Turkish	1	2.70

Appendix B

L1s of English learners

L1	Frequency	Percent
Spanish	11	29.73
Vietnamese	4	10.81
Arabic	3	8.11
French	3	8.11
Portuguese	3	8.11
Chinese	1	2.70
Finnish	1	2.70
Gujarati	1	2.70
Hindi, Urdu and Telugu	1	2.70
Indonesian and Malay	1	2.70
Korean	1	2.70
Kurdish	1	2.70
Malay & Chinese	1	2.70
Norwegian	1	2.70
Romanian, Hungarian	1	2.70
Telugu	1.	2.70
Turkish	1	2.70
Yoruba	1	2.70

Appendix C

Survey about swearing for both native speakers and L2 learners of English

Directions: Judge the likelihood of the use of swear words in the following responses to each situation. In other words, decide if English speakers would use swear words in each example, or not. In all situations, only the speaker and the listener mentioned are able to hear the conversation and therefore hear the swear word. In other words, the conversations are private between the two people.

1. Two female friends in their early thirties are speaking together at a bar. One is telling a funny story, and when she finishes, the other says, laughing:

“That’s fucking hilarious!”

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

2. Two single men in their forties are talking about dating. One is complaining about how he can never seem to get a second date, and the other suggests it’s due to his personality. The first man is not offended, but laughs and says:

“Don’t be an asshole.”

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

3. Two female friends of the same age are talking in one of their apartments. One is telling a story about being accosted by a man the other day while walking to work, and she says:

“I was like, *what the hell?* It was six o’clock in the morning and I just wanted to be left alone.”

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

4. Two male roommates in their early twenties are speaking in the privacy of their home. One is telling the other about an accident he almost had the other day while driving home from work. You can tell he is annoyed by the situation. He says:

“First, this motherfucker came speeding up behind me! Then he drove around me and cut me off! I almost drove off the road!”

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

5. Two female roommates who have lived together for two years are fighting about the cleanliness of the house. One asks angrily: “Do you think you could be bothered to take the trash out for once?” The other responds:

“Yeah, but you don’t have to be such a bitch about it!”

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

6. A woman comes home to find her new female roommate cleaning their hardwood floors with bleach (a chemical that damages floors). She says:

“What the hell are you doing!”

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

7. A newly married couple in their twenties are discussing the woman’s promotion at her job. She is explaining the details of her new position, and the man says:

“That’s fucking awesome!”

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

8. Two college students who are close friends (a man and a woman) are talking about how tired they are after a school day. The woman says:

“Man, that was one long-ass day!”

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

9. A man and woman are confirming plans to go out on a second date next weekend. The woman asks: “Are we still on for Friday night?” He responds excitedly:

“Damn right we are!”

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

10. A boyfriend and girlfriend of five years are fighting. The girlfriend is starting to yell, so her boyfriend says:

“Calm the fuck down!”

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

11. Two close friends (a man and woman) are discussing a particular person who is causing trouble at work. The man says:

“Yesterday, this dick tried to give a huge share of his work to me!”

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

12. A couple (man and woman) that has been together for five years are fighting. The man starts using strong language, and the woman responds:

“I’ll be damned if I let you talk to me that way!”

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

13. John and his female boss are casually discussing a movie they both saw over the weekend. (They did not see the movie together.) John says:

“Man, that movie was shit!”

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

14. A teenager is talking to his grandmother over the phone about his day at school. He is explaining an altercation he had with a classmate:

“This asshole thought I would just let him copy my homework, but I was like why would I do that, I don’t even like you.”

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

15. Mary is talking with her professor during office hours. They are interrupted when the professor’s phone rings. It is his wife, and the professor knows without answering that she is calling because he forgot to let the dog out that morning. He says before answering:

“Ah, hell!”

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

16. A male worker is complaining about a colleague with his female boss. He says:

“I mean, I can’t believe this cunt even got this job in the first place!”

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

17. A teenager and her father are arguing over the father’s previous interaction with an employee at the grocery store. She thinks he was rude to the employee, and says:

“I can’t believe you acted like such an ass!”

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

18. A mom and her teenage son are fighting. He says something offensive. She yells:

“All right, get the hell out of my house!”

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

- 19.** A male university student sees the dean (president) of his college walking toward him on campus. He is pleased to see her, and says:

“What’s up, motherfucker?”

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

- 20.** A new teacher at an elementary school is talking to the principal. She is complaining to him about how a certain student always forgets to bring his homework. She says:

“Forgets’ my ass! He just doesn’t do it!”

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

- 21.** The CEO of a company is visiting one of his factories. He approaches a female worker, who is surprised and pleased to see him. She says:

“How the hell are you?”

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

- 22.** A thirty-year-old woman is walking through a narrow hallway in an office building. An elderly man coming the other way accidentally bumps into her. She says:

“Watch where you’re fucking going!”

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

- 23.** A male student is talking to the female president of his college. He is complaining about one of his professors, and says:

“He was such an asshole! He gave me a zero on a project I worked super hard on!”

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

- 24.** A female student is talking to the president of her university, who is leaving the school for another job. The student says to him:

“You’re such a bastard for leaving us!”

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

Appendix D

Interest Statements on Survey for L2 English Learners

(Perceived interest in learning L2 swearing knowledge and English language use)

***Instructions:* Select to what degree you agree or disagree with the following statements:**

1. I would benefit from a better understanding of how to swear in English.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

2. I already know what I need to know about swear words and how they're used in English.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

3. It is important to know about swear words in English.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

4. I would benefit if I were taught how to swear in an English language classroom.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

5. Without knowledge of swearing, I may misunderstand important things that other people say in English.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

6. I need to improve my knowledge of swearing in English.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

Appendix E

Background Information Questions Included in L2 Learners' Questionnaire

*If participants answer *e* or *f* on question 1 (beginning level proficiency), they are not invited to continue with the questionnaire. A message will appear that says: "Thank you for participating, but you do not meet the requirements for this survey. If you are a native speaker of English, please take the native speaker version of this survey (see original links). If you are a non-native speaker of English below an intermediate level of proficiency, thank you for your interest, but we will not need your responses."

1. Which of the following best characterizes your proficiency in English?
 - a. Native Speaker
 - b. Advanced
 - c. High Intermediate
 - d. Low Intermediate
 - e. High Beginning
 - f. Low Beginning

2. Do you have a desire to continue to improve your English in general? In other words, do you still consider yourself a learner of English?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

3. What is your gender?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Other _____

4. How old are you? _____ years

5. What is your nationality? _____

6. In what country do you currently live? _____

7. What is your native language? _____

8. At what age did you start learning English? (years) _____

9. In what context did you learn/acquire English?
 - a. Instructed setting (e.g. secondary school, university, language academy/institution)
 - b. Naturalistic setting (e.g. talking with friends or family, living with an English-speaking host family while studying abroad)
 - c. Mixed setting (instructed and naturalistic)

10. How often do you swear in your first language?

- a. Always
- b. Often
- c. Sometimes
- d. Rarely
- e. Never

11. How often do you swear in English?

- a. Always
- b. Often
- c. Sometimes
- d. Rarely
- e. Never

12. How do you feel about your ability to swear in English? Is it important to you to have knowledge about swearing in English? Why/why not?

13. Do you have any comments about the survey/anything you want the researcher to know?

Appendix F

Recruitment Materials to be Posted on Social Media

Are you interested in swearing? Do you speak English? If you answered yes to both of these questions, then you are invited to take this fun survey! You are encouraged to fill out the entirety of the questionnaire for research purposes, but have the right to withdraw at any time and for any reason. You must be at least 18 years old to participate.

If you consider yourself a *native speaker* of English, please take this survey:

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSe1Q0D3KaJjHw2L6DI-w8znw7ip1oB7xQCkRJa-XbwkyBdc6Q/viewform>

If you consider yourself a *non-native speaker* or *learner* of English, please take this survey:

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScODUMgHn1NSVrVtyJhZ3OwGk7EznPkURuOmQupxb6XOWCGnw/viewform>

Additionally, if you know any other speaker(s) of English who would be interested in this subject, I would appreciate it if you could please send along the survey to them, too.

Appendix G

Consent Information to be Included on First Page of Questionnaire

Consent Information:

- **TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT** Swearing in a Second Language
- **PURPOSE OF STUDY** The purpose of this study is to research the knowledge that English language learners have about swearing in English.
- **ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS** You have been asked to participate because you are an English speaker who is at least 18 years old.
- **PROCEDURES** You will be asked a series of questions in a survey that will take no longer than 30 minutes to complete.
- **RISKS** Swear words are used in the survey, so participants may feel a little uncomfortable.
- **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION** Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate. You may quit at any time without any penalty to you.
- **ANONYMITY** Your results are not connected to your email address. Therefore, your responses are entirely anonymous (the researcher will never know your name or email address).
- **RESEARCH STUDY RESULTS** If you want to learn about the results of this research study or have any questions, you may contact either:

Student Researcher: Grace Irwin irwing@mail.gvsu.edu

Faculty Advisor for the Project: Dan Brown brownda1@gvsu.edu

- If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Protections Office at Grand Valley State University, Grand Rapids, MI Phone: 616-331-3197 e-mail: RCI@GVSU.EDU
- **AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE** By clicking OK you are stating the following:
 - I am 18 years of age or older;
 - The details of this research study have been explained to me, including what I am being asked to do and the anticipated risks;
 - I am voluntarily agreeing to participate in the research as described on this form;
 - I may quit participating at any time without penalty.

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