

Swear Words as Speech Event: Discourse Patterns and Functions Among EFL Context

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Abstract. This study examines the increasing significance of pragmatic competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, specifically with the comprehension of socially sensitive language, including swearing words. Despite their common use in daily interactions to convey emotion, solidarity, and identity, swear words are not frequently examined in EFL research and are typically dismissed as just unacceptable or inappropriate language rather than valuable communicative tools. In Indonesia, swearing reflects the tension between global linguistic influences and local cultural norms, highlighting its connection to politeness and moral identity. This study aims to analyze the patterns and functions of swearing used by EFL students in university interactions and to explore how this language reflects wider social and communicative processes. A descriptive qualitative technique using an exploratory case study design was used to gather data from 22 students of the 2022 English Department at the University of Siliwangi through open-ended questionnaires, supported with public comments from YouTube and X. According to Hymes' ethnography of communication, known as the SPEAKING model, the results indicate two predominant forms of swearing: abusive and expletive. Swearing serves not just as a form of verbal abuse but also as an expressive and interactional approach to foster solidarity, indicate closeness, and articulate dissatisfaction in contextually suitable ways. The findings emphasize EFL learners as proactive constructors of meaning who navigate identity and social relationships through language, highlighting the significance of cultural sensitivity, contextual awareness, and pragmatic competence in managing multifaceted language practices in intercultural communication.

Keywords: discourse functions; discourse patterns; EFL; speaking model; swear words

Introduction

Swear words frequently appear in everyday language interactions as means of expressing frustration, building solidarity, and marking social boundaries in addition to serving as emotional outlets. Both the Oxford Dictionary and Jay (1992, 2000) as cited in (Timothy & Janschewitz, 2008) define swear words as language strategies used to convey intense emotions, which often include forbidden topics, and typically considered disrespectful. However, (Giffin, 2016) contends that despite their seeming antisocial nature, cursing can serve as a therapeutic expression or a means of releasing emotions. Understanding when and why to swear becomes a critical component of Pragmatic competency in second language communication for EFL learners, whose exposure to swear words frequently originates from movies, social media, or casual peer interaction (Martínez, 2022).

Swear words are complicated because of their dual meaning. On the one hand, they are viewed as indicators of rudeness, contempt, or violence, and they are incompatible with the norms of

hospitality and decency in many cultural and educational environments, particularly in Indonesia (Prasetio et al., 2024). Swear words, on the other hand, serve as expressive instruments that enable speakers to make their point, establish a connection with others, or highlight a specific emotion.

According to research by (Friyanto & Ashadi, 2020), swearing has become more common in casual online communication as EFL learners pick up swear words via social media sites like Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube. In particular, Indonesian students have a challenge. English swearing may appear ordinary and acceptable in Western media, yet it may cause misunderstandings or even anger when used in Indonesian social standards.

Indonesia places a strong emphasis on language use as a representation of moral and national identity, with roots in Pancasila principles and politeness traditions. Therefore, character education that harmonizes language usage with cultural identity and values is emphasized in the Merdeka Curriculum (Amalia & Najicha, 2023). As a result, learners should find a balance between respecting cultural sensitivity and learning true language, creating a conflict between linguistic reality and sociocultural integrity.

In light of this, this study views swear words to be parts of speech events rather than just linguistic elements (Hymes, 1972). According to Hymes' ethnography of communication framework, a speech event is a communicative act that is influenced by contextual factors and regulated by social norms.

His 'SPEAKING' model, which consists of Setting and Scene, Participants, Ends, Act Sequence, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms, and Genre, provides an insightful perspective on how swear words are used in EFL discourse. A comprehensive investigation of the relationship between language identity and culture is made possible by knowing the structure of swear words and the reasons behind their usage in particular social contexts and interactions. The fact that swears words are speech events highlights that their use is not arbitrary or purely emotive. Rather, they serve unique functions (discourse functions) and take place in patterned sequences (discourse patterns).

This study uses a number of fundamental ideas to give it a theoretical basis. First of all, the meaning of the form and pragmatic purpose of swear words are both included in the definition. According to Jay (2000), Stephens (2013), and Ljung (2011) as cited in (Nicolau & Sukamto, 2014), swear words are emotionally charged, frequently impromptu, and used within socioemotional situations. According to Montagu (1967), referenced in (Osborne, 2020), swearing can take many different forms, from vulgarity and profanity to euphemistic and blasphemous terms. This illustrates the variety of purposes that swear words can have based on context, intent, and delivery.

Propositional (planned and context-based) and non-propositional (spontaneous, emotional outbursts) are the two main categories into which swear words belong by Jay (2009), Pinker (2007), Vingerhoets et al (2013) as cited in (Finn, 2017). Non-propositional swearing, such as cathartic swearing, arises in response to extreme discomfort or frustration, whereas propositional swear words, such as dysphemistic or emphatic swearing, are frequently used to express emphasis or judgment. In the terms of forms, the swear words that are seen are expletive (used to convey stress without a specific target), abusive (used to offend), and idiomatic (sometimes indirect or culturally softened) swearing by Montagu (1967) as cited in (Osborne, 2020). This distinction is important for EFL learners because it shows how emotionally engaged and pragmatically aware they are.

Dell Hymes' ethnography of communication serves as the theoretical foundation that underpins this investigation. The 'SPEAKING' model developed by (Hymes, 1972) provides a methodical way to analyze the communicative event. Setting and Scene (the location of the

conversation), Participants (the people involved), Ends (the desired result), Act of Sequence (the discourse structure), Key (tone or mood), Instrumentalities (the channel of communication), Norms (the rules of conduct), and Genre (the type of speech) are all crucial components in comprehending how language works in a given context.

The ability to be pragmatic is the third theoretical point. The ability to use language effectively in a variety of social circumstances is known as pragmatic competence in second language learning. This competency is crucial for EFL learners to make sure that their language use, particularly sensitive language like profanity, conforms to the target culture's norms. According to (Mokoro, 2024) and (Margana, 2011), pragmatic competence is an important component of language competency that affects both the appropriateness of terms used in social situations and grammatical correctness. Language identity is another supporting idea. Language is more than just a means of communication; it is a reflection of individual and collective identity. As a language act, swearing can be used to identify oneself from outsiders, demonstrate in-group unity, or show group membership (Yadav, 2024). Swear words may be used by EFL students in an attempt to appear more natural or to fit in with the youth cultures of other countries. However, in a social and norm-conscious society like Indonesia, such adoption must also be balanced with an understanding of local norms.

The idea of power relations is closely tied to identity. According to Foucault (1980) as cited in (Christensen, 2024), institutional entities and language are used to produce power rather than just individuals. "Who gets to talk", "who is heard", and "whose speech" is considered appropriate are all examples of power dynamics in language. Swear words have the capacity to intimidate or exert authority, particularly when they are applied by those in positions of authority. Swearing, on the other hand, can be used to disrupt formality, level the playing field, or foster intimacy among equals. This emphasizes how important it is to consider both the spoken words and the relationship dynamics in which they are exchanged.

Additional depth is provided by the consideration of politeness and impoliteness. Culpeper's impoliteness framework (2017) as cited in (Theresia & Nisa, 2024) and (Brown & Planck, 2015) politeness theory both highlight how language can be used to explicitly harm or save face. Swear words can have affiliative purposes, such as when used in joke among friends, but they also frequently violate etiquette standards. Understanding these subtleties is especially important in Indonesia, where language civility is ingrained in cultural values.

Thus, swearing functions at the relationship of sociocultural context, Pragmatic patterns and functions. The EFL student in this study is an active speaker of meaning, identity, and expression rather than just a passive recipient of English norms. Although they are frequently written off as incidental, swear words play a crucial role in this discussion. The goal of this study is to understand the patterns of swear words, their functions, and how they represent larger cultural and communicative dynamics. By doing this, the study advances our knowledge of language use in EFL contexts and emphasizes the value of pragmatics, cultural sensitivity, and contextual awareness in second language acquisition.

Methods

This research utilizes a qualitative approach with an exploratory case study framework to analyze the patterns and roles of swearing in interactions among EFL students. A qualitative approach is suitable for examining complex sociolinguistic phenomena from the viewpoints of participants inside their social environments (Baxter & Jack, 2015; Tellis, 1997). The study employs

Hymes' (1972) SPEAKING model to figure out discourse patterns and functions in language use.

The research was carried out at the English Education Study Program, University of Siliwangi, with 22 students from the 2022 cohort, chosen for their active engagement and communicative proficiency in English. Primary data were gathered through open-ended questionnaires disseminated using Google Forms, enabling participants to articulate their experiences and views comprehensively. Not only that, secondary data were also acquired from public comments on YouTube and X (formerly Twitter) to clarify the wider social applications of swearing. The researcher chose social media as a data source because these platforms are public spaces that are often used by people to express their opinions freely. By observing these comments, researchers can see how the patterns and functions of swear words are used by society in general. This also serves as a comparison or supporting material to the data obtained from EFL students.

Data were evaluated using discourse analysis to investigate language trends, lexical selection, and sociocultural significances. This method allows a systematic analysis of the role of swear words as expressive and interactional tools in educational and public communication settings. As stated by Burr (1955) in Gill (2000), discourse analysis aims to understand how people think, speak, and act which is actually formed from social construction through language and culture. To conclude, by using a qualitative approach and relevant analytical tools, this research is expected to contribute to the understanding of pragmatics and socio-linguistics in foreign language learning in the Indonesian educational context.

Result and Discussion

The research patterns and functions of swear words used in EFL contexts are presented and explained in this chapter. The information gathered from responses by participants and social media comments is examined and interpreted in relation to relevant linguistic theories as well as the social media comments in which language was used. This discussion helps in gaining a deeper understanding of how EFL learners use, interpret, and use swear words in communication contexts.

Patterns of swear words: Abusive Swearing and Expletive Swearing.

Respondents revealed that, *"Most of them are used when in serious or angry situations."* (P4, P5, P11 in questionnaire data), this statement is supported by comments from social media platforms, namely YouTube with one of the comments from @azurecearsky such as *"Merdeka my ass"* as a form of negative viewpoint about the video uploaded by the channel that is discussing the issue. From this interpretation, it is in line with the theory of swear words form according to (Montagu, 1976) as cited in (Osborne, 2020) which states that the use of swear words that function as a form of emotional expression that is directly directed at the target to insult and abuse someone, then the form in question is a form of Abusive Swearing.

Another type of swear words emerged from both primary and secondary data, namely Expletive Swearing. One of the respondents stated that, *"Sometimes, they are used to create humor, add emphasis,..."* (P7 in questionnaire data). In the statement from the respondent, swear words are used to add expressiveness and emotional emphasis to sentences on social media. This is supported by netizen comments.

On social media on platform X from @kyuuz_ie which says that, *"...about how damn big impact will be caused by the RUU TNI and the RUU Polri"*. In the Swear words used in social media, it can be seen that their use is related to the expressive side which serves to emphasize the purpose of swear words on the issue uploaded in the comments on X.

Functions of swear words based on speech event 'SPEAKING' on Dell Hymes theory:

Setting and Scene, is an element that purpose is to find out in what places and situations swear words occur in the EFL context. The functions that found is **to express emotions**. On the primary data, One of EFL stated that, *"...It often happens when students are joking or feeling emotional..."* (P15 in questionnaire data). These findings are reinforced by secondary data from netizen comments where swear words are also often used in social media, especially from @Bofjishu in the platform X to criticize such as *"**Fuck** indo govt, republic mafia **bastard!**"*. The sentence appears as an emotional reaction from one of the netizens when discussing sensitive issues or phenomena that trigger negative opinions from these netizens. Based on the statements from these respondents, the use of swear words is generally in relaxed situations because the acceptance of the response of swear words can depend on the delivery and the intonation produced by the person who utters it.

Other functions that found is **to enhance emotions**. One respondent stated that, *"...people often use swear words to express strong..."*(P7 in questionnaire data). In line with this, there is comment from @Bulbs0000 from YouTube state that, *"the most corruption country in the worls, provide free meal for school kind a funny **asf**"*. The word *"asf"* in the sentence of the netizen's comment illustrates that the sentence is seasoned to emphasize and improve a sentence so that the purpose of the comment can be clearly felt.

Second element is **Participants**, refers to who speaks and to whom the swear words are expressed. The functions that found is **to build solidarity**. One respondent stated that, *"...They often come up when people are joking, surprised..."*(P17 in questionnaire data) and also supporting data from YouTube comments from @Bulbs0000 such as *"The most corruption country in the world, provide free meal for school kind a funny asf"*. From the comment, it can be seen that one netizen commented with freedom of expression by using swear words because the netizen used an anonymous account to upload his comment which can influence someone to express what they feel by showing that the absence of personal closeness and anonymity also creates courage in speech because there are no relational ties that hinder.

Third element is **Ends**, refers to the purpose or for what the use of swear words is expressed in an interaction. The functions that found is **to express emotions**. One of the respondents stated that, *"...the purpose is either to express emotions or just for humor..."*(P20 in questionnaire data). In line with this, there is comment from @Bofjishu on X commented as follows, *"fuck indo govt, republic mafia **bastard!**"*, which is the word *"bastard"* swear words in the form of Abusive Swearing are useful for insulting the target directly, so it can be seen that the presence of swear words in the sentence indicates that swear words function to express the expression that is felt according to the issue or phenomenon at hand.

Other functions that found is **to enhance emotions**. Based on data that has been obtained from primary data, one respondent stated something like, *"...It's like they want to show stronger emotions or make their point more intense..."*(P18 in questionnaire data). In line with the statement from the example above, it can be strengthened by comment from @bagusaurelius1417 on the YouTube platform which state that *"**WTF**, that's not true,..."*. In the comment, a netizen described how surprised he was by the video uploaded by one of the channels that became an issue in the community. With a sense of shock and denial, it produces a statement using swear words which is a form of spontaneous expression of emotion which refers to swear words as a Pragmatic tool to convey the purpose in a sentence and emphasize meaning.

Fourth element is **Act of Sequence**, refers to the structure of swear words when expressed in a sentence, for example whether the swear words are voiced at the beginning, middle, or end of the

sentence, which can change the meaning and purpose of the swear words uttered. Functions that found on this element is **to criticize or mock**.

Respondent stated that the forms of swear words that are often used and heard are located in the middle and at the end of a sentence, *"Most of it in the end of the conversation ..."* (P10 in questionnaire data), which from the statement states that the most frequently used swear words are at the end of the sentence and indicates that the structure of swear words at the end of the sentence is a form of Abusive Swearing. In addition, @azureclearsky stated comment that containing swear words on YouTube platform, *"Merdeka my **ass**"*, The sentence illustrates that the placement of the word *"**ass**"* is at the end of the phrase, so the exact form of swear words in the statement is part of Abusive Swearing.

The other functions that found is **to enhance emotions**. There is one statement from the respondent which states that, *"They often appear in the middle of a sentence, ..."* (P14 in questionnaire data). In line with the statement from one of the respondents, it was reinforced by one of the comments from social media on the YouTube platform from @rexevan6714 such as *"..., one **hell** of rich teacher"*, where the placement of the word *"**hell**"* is in the middle of the phrase so that it shows that the swear words are a form of Expletive Swearing.

Fifth element is **Key**, refers to the intonation and manner of delivery of swear words in interaction. The functions that found is **to express emotions**. Respondent stated that the use of swear words in a joking tone is the most common because it is used among peers and during a relaxed situation with small talk. *"The tone of voice is usually joking or casual, ..., it can also be serious or angry if someone is upset or frustrated..."* (P17 in questionnaire data). From these interpretations, there is data that is reinforced from netizens with a wide variety on the platform X, @Amal81gmailcom1 commented that, *"The government Indonesian is **fucking shit**"*, in this sentence shows a cynical style and frustration with an issue that occurs. While on the other hand examples of comments on the YouTube platform there are comments that use Swear words from @rexevan6714 such as, *"\$650 a month?? that's one **hell** of a rich teacher"*, where the comment has a style such as shock or even has a sarcasm side from the uploader. The difference in style and tone shows that even though swear words are used in a sentence, the intent and nuance of the emotion is highly dependent on the style of delivery.

Sixth element is **Instrumentalities**, refers to what oral or written media they use when expressing swear words. The functions that found is **to build solidarity**. The respondent said that, *"Mostly in spoken conversations and on social media platforms like Instagram stories, Twitter, or memes shared among friends."* (P14 in questionnaire data). In line with this data, the secondary data from @Bofjishu comments from platform X shows that the use of swear words is very free and open as in the comment *"**fuck** indo govt, republic mafia **bastard!**"* which shows that social media is a public space that allows for direct and uncensored expression of emotions. This shows that netizens who comment feel comfortable and free to express humorous or even sharp opinions at once on social media which does not demand social responsibility as strict as direct communication and those also correlated with solidarity between people.

Seventh element is **Norms**, refers to the social rules that apply to a particular social group or community. The functions that found is **to build solidarity**. One of respondents stated an opinion that, *"...but they might be acceptable in informal situations among friends"* (P13 in questionnaire data). On the other hand, the data obtained on platform YouTube as secondary data, there is a comment from @ahmedlag4909 that stated *"still same, same **shitty** things here"*, It can be seen that the norm of using swear words on social media tends to be looser than in person. The sentences of

the comments interpret the insulting meaning directly without any embarrassment or attempt to disguise the words.

Last element is **Genre**, refers to what style of speech the swear words are expressed whether in casual or formal discussions. The functions that found is **to criticize or mock**. One of the respondent stated that, *"Swear words are most common in informal, emotional conversations such as casual chats, arguments."*(P14 in questionnaire data). In line with that, there is comment on X platform from @cmoanacrystalz7 such as, *"...I hope my friend, family in Indonesian safe, corrupt **bitch**".* It can be seen in the comments on the response to the issues that are happening in Indonesia, a netizen using swear words to be frank with the feelings felt by him, so that he can freely criticize or even insult at the same time against the intended target through free and informal forms.

The other functions that found is to enhance emotions. One of the respondent stated that, *"..., or when expressing strong emotions in everyday situations "*(P6 in questionnaire data). In line with the data from EFL respondents, the data from @Bulbs0000 on YouTube coments such as the sentence *"the most corruption country in the world, provide free meal for school kind a funny **asf**",* is an example of Expletive Swearing with a casual context that is useful to add or increase the emotion felt by the uploader so that the genre in the comment is an expressive reaction and social criticism that usually appears in the public space in social media.

From the data above, it can see that all the patterns and functions of swear words that happens in reality is came from some aspects. Language identity plays a central role in the emergence of swear words during interaction.

As illustrated by (Mahmoodi, 2018), language reflects social group affiliations such as ethnicity or shared norms, which influence how individuals process and express language, including taboo forms like swearing. The use of Abusive or Expletive Swearing may stem from social environments or peer groups that normalize such expressions, thereby fostering familiarity and solidarity. This shows that language identity can motivate the freedom to swear among peers with shared backgrounds.

Closely related is the concept of power relations. According to Foucault (1980) as cited in (Christensen, 2024), power is embedded in social interactions and reflected through roles in society. Swearing across unequal social positions—such as from a student to a teacher—may be seen as disrespectful. However, among equals, like classmates, swear words are more tolerated and may even strengthen relationships. Politeness theory also influences how swear words are received. Leech (2007) as cited in (Simatupang & Naibaho, 2021) states that politeness fosters harmony in communication. In Indonesian culture, where politeness is highly valued, swearing is generally avoided. However, within close-knit peer groups, swearing may function as mock politeness, reducing its offensive force and instead serving as a bonding mechanism within the group.

Conclusion

In conclusion, swear words in EFL contexts do not only function as swearing, but also have Pragmatic and social value in interaction. Their use largely depends on who is speaking, to whom, and in what situation. EFL learners should be wiser in using expressive language also teacher is also expected to be able to guide students to understand the limits of using swear words according to the context. Future research can explore more in terms of gender, social status. Or types of swear words used.

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