

Thesis Proposal: L2 Swearing Pragmatics

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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, 2014); 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 perceived value in improving this competence. Baseline data from native English speaking participant judgments will be 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 will also complete a survey indicating their interest in learning about swear words to measure their perceived value in developing this competence. It is hypothesized that there will 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. 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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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. Additionally, one instance of swearing may overlap in more than one of these classifications; for example, saying *Jesus Christ!* is undoubtedly an epithet, or emotional outburst of language, but it also counts as a profanity, or as one may, “taking the lord’s name in vain.” (Note that there is yet a fine line between profanity and *blasphemy*, which are technically different.)

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). 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 of swearing for each gender is highly context specific. For example, women swear more in same-sex interactions than in mixed-sex interactions.

A limited amount of research has been done in this field, but even less in the area of second language swearing. An exception is Dewaele’s (2010) book *Emotions in Multiple Languages*, which 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. Dewaele

found that, overall, multilinguals prefer swearing in either their L1 or dominant language, and that swear words in the L1 are usually felt to have greater emotional force (for more research on emotional intensity, see Ferré, García, Fraga, Sánchez-Casas, & Molero, 2010; Harris, Ayçiçeği, & Gleason, 2003; and Dewaele, 2004). Additionally, participants 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.

The participants in Dewaele's (2010) study were highly competent users of their additional languages and therefore had the option of using those languages to swear, though the overall theme is that they did not usually choose to do so. It might be assumed, however, that many second language learners often lack knowledge of L2 swear words, their appropriateness, and pragmatic function. 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.

Rationale: Exploratory Study as Background to Proposed Thesis

An exploratory study that I conducted last semester in ENG 664 titled, "Influences on Acquisition of Swearing in an L2" (attached in email for reference) provides some evidence that L2 English students have interest in learning about swearing and perceive value in the teaching of it. 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 first investigate how often L2 English speaking university students swear in English. A secondary aim of the study was to discover the reasons behind the use or

non-use and acquisition versus non-acquisition of English swearing (for indeed, just because an L2 user *can* swear in English, it does not mean they *do* swear in English). 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.

A quote from one of the participants suggests that there is a gap between English users' knowledge of swear words and their perceived value or 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...”

This proposed study aims to explore this potential gap in L2 competence, which may provide evidence that will contribute to our understanding of the potential value 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).

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) could potentially offer 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.

Influential Studies: Measuring L2 Swearing Competence

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 hypothetical scenarios involving taboo words. In each scenario, the speaker (either 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”: either high, medium or low) were specified. The design yielded 81 different scenarios included in their questionnaire, one example being: “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 (2014) 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 (2014) 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.

Kapoor's (2014) study also points to potential moderating variables; cultural differences between English and the Indian participants' native languages potentially influenced the results. Ljung (2011) discusses how swearing in terms of hell and the devil has retained much of its power, particularly 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.

Jay and Janschewitz (2008) and Kapoor's (2014) 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 (2014). The choice of terms to describe swearing may be problematic when 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 they are usually neither impolite nor offensive. In adapting Beers-Fägersten's (2012) social/annoyance distinction but labeling annoyance swearing as 'abusive,' Kapoor (2014) also oversimplifies the complexity of annoyance swearing. Jay and Janschewitz (2008) and Kapoor (2014) 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 (2014) 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 (2014) 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 proposed 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 Question

The proposed study aims to measure what L2 speakers know about swearing in English and identify the potential gap between this competence and their interest or perceived value 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? Thus, the potentially moderating variable is L2 English users' perceived value in developing competence in swearing, and the dependent variable is their actual swearing competence. The research question is:

To what extent is there a relationship between English L2 learners' swearing pragmatic competence and their interest in developing such competence?

It is hypothesized that there will 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.

Proposed Methods

Instrument

A questionnaire will be used by NSs that will have one part: the swearing test (Appendix A), described below. The L2 English learners’ questionnaire will have two parts: the same swearing test as the NSs (Appendix A), and a short demographic survey and questions concerning their interest in and attitudes toward English swearing (Appendix B).

The “swearing test” makes up the bulk of the questionnaire for both NSs and L2 English learners. This proposed measure draws closely from tests developed by Jay and Janschewitz (2008) and Kapoor (2014), 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 or annoyance), and tabooeness of the swear word (Beers-Fägersten, 2012). This instrument also excludes scenarios that are inauthentic, like some of the items in Jay and Janschewitz’s (2008) questionnaire (e.g., why would a dean be in a dorm room?). The factors specified in each scenario in the proposed test include social distance, type of swearing, and tabooeness of the swear word used. Thus, it will be a 4 X 2 X 3 design, resulting in 24 total items, illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

Design of Swearing Test

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

In Appendix A (the swearing test), the design for each question is also specified. For example, in question 1, the following formula is given:

3 x social x fuck

Which means:

Social distance (3) x Type (social) x Tabooness (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 low social distance. **Social** is the type of swearing used in that scenario, utilizing one of the tones specified in Table 1. **Fuck** is the representative swear word of the high-tabooness words (in later questions, each representative swear word may be used in exchange with other swear words in the same tabooness level). Thus, scenario 1 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!”

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

Participants must rate the likelihood of the swearing utterance in response to the situation to demonstrate their pragmatic swearing competence. The context of this swearing utterance 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 this scenario Very Likely.

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.

Introducing public versus private setting as another variable would complicate the survey and yield far more scenarios, so this was controlled for by making all contexts private (in that only the speaker and listener hear the conversation). 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.

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*, since, as discussed above, it gives the impression that swear words are inherently offensive or inappropriate. Using likelihood hopefully helps neutralize this impression and retains focus on appropriateness relative to context. Also, this questionnaire uses the so-called *tabooness* of the swear words. While this intrinsic classification of individual swear words could be problematic (as it could be argued that tabooness is necessarily tied to context), the present design incorporates tabooness, 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). Tabooness for these words were categorized as either high, medium, or low tabooness based on previous research that found that sexual terms are generally rated most offensive, followed by excretory terms which, in turn, are typically judged more offensive than sacred terms.

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. Table 2 shows how many times each swear word is used in the test.

Table 2

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

Hell, *ass*, and *fuck* are used the most often because they were randomly chosen as representative swear words of their respective taboo level. Also, *fuck* was found to be more frequently used than *cunt* and *shit* (Beers-Fägersten, 2012), so that 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.

Participants

Native speakers of English will be invited to participate, as well as intermediate level or higher L2 English learners. At the beginning of the survey there will be a question asking L2 English learners to self-rate their proficiency level, with descriptors given for each level based on the CASAS (Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems) Skill Level Descriptors for ELLs.

Procedure

Participants will be recruited online. The questionnaire is on Google Forms, and will be emailed to potential participants and posted on Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter. IRB approval will be acquired before the questionnaire is used for final data collection (see draft of IRB protocol in Appendix C). Participants will be warned of the nature of the questionnaire (i.e., that it includes swear words) and be informed that they have the right not to continue with it at any moment. The questionnaire will take approximately ten minutes for NSs to complete, and 20 to 30 minutes for L2 English learners to complete.

Initial Piloting and Revision of the Questionnaire

An initial draft of the swearing test was given to a convenience sample of 24 friends and family members, all native speakers of English. The piloting allowed the researcher to see if participants disagreed on the rating of certain scenarios, perhaps pointing to ambiguities that can be modified through revision. Table 3 shows the results of this piloting.

Table 3

Results of Initial Piloting

Frequency of each rating for each test item				
Question	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Likely	Very Likely
1	0	0	9	15
2	1	1	10	12
3	0	0	7	17
4	0	0	4	20
5	1	2	9	12
6	1	3	9	11

7	0	1	13	10
8	0	2	6	16
9	2	8	8	5
10	0	0	14	10
11	0	2	11	11
12	1	4	7	12
13	5	11	5	3
14	11	8	4	1
15	1	13	8	2
16	15	4	4	1
17	2	10	10	2
18	2	2	11	9
19	22	2	0	0
20	12	9	3	0
21	17	5	0	2
22	14	9	0	1
23	13	11	0	0
24	22	2	0	0

Responses were determined to be consistent if 60% of responses fell on the right side or the left side (either Likely + Very unlikely or Unlikely + Very unlikely). Only the responses to questions 9, 15, and 17 proved inconsistent (and are bolded in the table). Question 9 is as follows:

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

56.5% of participants chose either Very likely or Likely, while 43.5% of participants chose either Very unlikely or Unlikely. While one is clearly the majority, the percentages may nonetheless be too similar, pointing to ambiguities in this question. This question may be discarded, and a new one written its place. Or, perhaps it should be kept, as additional piloting from native speakers may clarify ambiguities.

Question 15 is the following:

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

While 41.6% percent of the participants said this was either Likely or Very Likely, 58.4% said either Unlikely or Very Unlikely. Again, this may be too ambiguous. The researcher predicted that participants would rate it as Likely, mostly because of the low-tabooness of the swear word (*hell* has been rated in previous research as one of the least taboo swear words [Beers-Fägersten, 2012]). The relationship between the professor and Mary might be specified a bit more; i.e., “Mary is talking with her favorite professor during office hours...”

Likewise, there was some disagreement over question 17, which is:

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

It was a 50/50 split along Very Unlikely and Unlikely versus Likely and Very Likely. The researcher predicted it would be judged as Unlikely to Very Unlikely given the tabooess of the word and the type of swearing (it is definitely annoyance, maybe angry or even abusive), especially since it is the daughter swearing *at* the father. This entire question may be eliminated, as there is likely great variation in how children speak to their parents, based on a range of factors. An entirely new question will be drafted that makes clearer a less ambiguous relationship.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics will be used to analyze the data. First, baseline native speaker results will be calculated. The majority response (mode) will be taken as the baseline against which to compare L2 English users' ratings. L2 English learners will be analyzed individually, each assigned a score based on how similar their responses are to the NSs'. Correlation analysis will be used (assuming n size of L2 English learner participants will be suitable) to explore potential relationship between L2 English learner participants' overall perception of value in learning swear word competence (i.e., an average score of items 15-19), and their overall swearing competence scores.

Timeline for Completion

- **Late-November (Immediately after proposal defense):** Incorporate feedback from committee members to update methods as necessary; submit IRB protocol.
- **Mid-December (Immediately upon receiving IRB approval):** Begin collecting data; send out questionnaire to friends, family, classmates, post on social media sites (Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, etc.).

- **Mid-January:** Finish collecting data; begin data analysis with help of student statistics consultants at GVSU.
- **Early March:** Have draft of thesis ready to send to committee members.
- **Mid-March:** Thesis defense
- **By April 26:** Submit all documents to Graduate School.

Conclusion

One reason for pursuing this line of research is that it is simply fascinating. The phenomenon behind the literature in this area which influences the instrument of the present proposed study is the *swearing paradox*, discussed in Beers-Fägersten's (2012) book, *Who's Swearing Now?* In the study outlined in this book, she found that though 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. The reason the use of taboo words is not always taboo is because 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? This study aims to answer these questions, as well as address more practical concerns. Should swearing be taught in second language classrooms? By examining the gap between L2 English learners' interest in and perceived value of learning about swearing and their actual receptive swearing pragmatic competence, this study has potentially practical implications for teachers, administrators, and curriculum designers.

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Appendix A

Swearing Test for both native speakers and L2 learners of English

***In all situations, only the speaker and the listener mentioned are able to hear the conversation and therefore hear the swear word.**

Directions: Judge the likelihood of the use of swear words in the following responses to each situation:

1. 3 x social x fuck

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. 3 x social x ass

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 its 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. 3 x social x hell

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. 3 x annoyance x fuck

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 zoomed around me and cut me off! I almost drove off the road!”

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

5. 3 x annoyance x ass

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. 3 x annoyance x hell

A woman comes home to find her new female roommate cleaning their hardwood floors with bleach. She exclaims:

“What the hell are you doing!”

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

7. 2 x social x fuck

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. 2 x social x ass

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. 2 x social x hell

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. 2 x annoyance x fuck

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. 2 x annoyance x ass (bitch, dick)

Two close friends (a man and woman) are discussing a particular troublemaker 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. 2 x annoyance x hell (damn, bastard)

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. 1 x social x fuck (use shit or cunt)

John and his female boss are casually discussing a movie they both saw over the weekend. John says:

“Man, that movie was shit!”

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

14. 1 x social x ass

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. 1 x social x hell

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. 1 x annoyance x fuck (use shit or cunt)

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. 1 x annoyance x ass

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. 1 x annoyance x hell

A mom and her teenage son are fighting. He says something offensive, so she yells:

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

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

19. 0 x social x fuck

A male university student sees the dean 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

20.0 x social x ass

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

21.0 x social x hell

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

22.0 x annoyance x fuck

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, and she says:

“Watch where you’re fucking going!”

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

23.0 x annoyance x ass

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

24.0 x annoyance x hell

A student is talking to the president of her university who is leaving the school for another job. She says:

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

Very unlikely Unlikely Likely Very likely

Appendix B

Questionnaire for L2 English Learners

(Adapted from the Language Contact Profile (Freed, Dewey, Segalowitz, & Halter, 2004), and CASAS Skill Level Descriptors for ELL)

*If participants answer *d* or *e* on question 1 (beginning level proficiency), they are not invited to continue with the questionnaire.

*If participants answer *7 days a week* on question 8, they are redirected to question 12.

1. What is your proficiency in English?
 - a. **Advanced** (Can participate well in most or all survival, social, and work situations)
 - b. **High Intermediate** (Can fulfill basic survival needs and limited social needs)
 - c. **Low Intermediate** (Can fulfill basic survival needs and very predictable social situations)
 - d. **High Beginning** (Can participate with some difficulty in situations related to present needs)
 - e. **Low Beginning** (Functions in a very limited way in situations related to present needs)

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

3. How old are you? _____ years

4. What is your nationality? _____

5. In what country do you currently live? _____

6. What is your native language? _____

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

8. 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)

9. How often do you use English (reading, writing, listening, or speaking)?
 - a. 1-2 days a week
 - b. 3-4 days a week
 - c. 5-6 days a week
 - d. 7 days a week

10. How much do you use English to **speak** with friends, family, colleagues, strangers, etc.?
 - a. 0 hours per day
 - b. 1 minute to 1 hour per day
 - c. 1-3 hours per day
 - d. 3-6 hours per day
 - e. 7-10 hours per day
 - f. 11-14 hours per day

11. How much do you **read or write** in English to do any of the following: work, homework, schoolwork, read newspapers/magazines/novels, write journals/diaries/letters/emails?
 - a. 0 hours per day
 - b. 1 minute to 1 hour per day
 - c. 1-3 hours per day
 - d. 3-6 hours per day
 - e. 7-10 hours per day
 - f. 11-14 hours per day

12. How much do you **listen** to English (movies/TV/videos, songs, radio, etc.)?
 - a. 0 hours per day
 - b. 1 minute to 1 hour per day
 - c. 1-3 hours per day
 - d. 3-6 hours per day
 - e. 7-10 hours per day
 - f. 11-14 hours per day

13. How much do you use English to **speak** with friends, family, colleagues, strangers, etc.?
 - a. 1-2 days a week
 - b. 3-4 days a week
 - c. 5-6 days a week
 - d. 7 days a week

14. How much do you **read or write** in English to do any of the following: work, homework, schoolwork, read newspapers/magazines/novels, write journals/diaries/letters/emails?
 - a. 1-2 days a week
 - b. 3-4 days a week
 - c. 5-6 days a week
 - d. 7 days a week

15. How much do you **listen** to English (movies/TV/videos, songs, radio, etc.)?

- a. 1-2 days a week
- b. 3-4 days a week
- c. 5-6 days a week
- d. 7 days a week

(Perceived value of learning L2 swearing knowledge)

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

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

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

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

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

18. I do not think it is important to know about swear words in English.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

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

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

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

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

Appendix C

Draft of IRB Protocol

Definition of Human Subjects Research (does the proposed project fit all three of the following criteria?): Yes

In addition to the GVSU HRRC, has or will another IRB review this study? No

1. Study Title and Personnel

Study Title:

L2 Swearing Pragmatics

1a. Project Personnel

Principal Investigator (PI) = Daniel Brown, brown1@gvsu.edu

College: College of language, arts and sciences (CLAS)

Dept: English

Your Authorizing Official: (English Dept. Chair) Ashley Shannon (shannoas@gvsu.edu)

Will there be another person involved in this research? Yes

1b. Training Certificates

1c. Conflict of Interest (COI) Disclosure and Certification

Is this a faculty-, staff-, or student-led project? Faculty-led project

Other Project Personnel: Yes; Grace Irwin

Indicate the project role(s) that other personnel will fill: Project Coordinator

1d. Project Personnel Training Certificates/ COI Form

2a. Project Information

Anticipated start date: December 1, 2018

Anticipated end date: April 30, 2019

Is this project funded? No

2b. Study Location: Online

2c. Reliance Agreement Request: No

3. Review Type

What type of review do you believe your project falls under? Exempt

Exempt Category Number (1-6), if known:

Expedited category number (1-7), if known:

4a. Exemption Category 1:

4b. Exemption Category 2: Yes

Conditions that apply: NOT identified

4c. Exemption Category 3: No

4d. Exemption Category 4: No

4e. Exemption Category 5: No

4f. Exemption Category 6: No

5. Expedited Categories

6. Purpose of Research

Briefly describe the purpose of your activity:

The purpose of this study is to address a gap in the literature concerning what second language users actually know about swearing in their L2. It aims to develop an an updated measure of L2 pragmatic swearing competence in order to investigate the relationship between learners’ receptive swearing competence and the perceived value in improving this competence.

How will the resulting information contribute to the existing knowledge base?

Little research concerns what L2 users actually know about swearing in their L2, or how learners perceive or value the possibility of being taught about swearing in their L2. If, as hypothesized, there is a gap between users’ swearing competence and interest in improving this competence, then it will provide evidence that swearing should be taught in second language classrooms, which will be of interest to ESL/EFL teachers and curriculum designers.

How will the results be disseminated (presented or published) to the public, scientific community, and research participants?

This research will first be presented as a master’s thesis (i.e., at a public thesis defense). It will also potentially be presented at a conference in TESOL or applied linguistics, and possibly published in a journal. Additionally, it will state on the online consent form that participants can contact the researcher for details of the findings when they are ready.

7. Subject population Description

7a. Subject Population Description:

Please enter the anticipated number of subjects: 100

Please provide a justification for why the number of subjects to be recruited is appropriate:

A large number of participants is preferable, in order to show credibility of the research.

7b. Vulnerable Populations: No

7c. GVSU Varsity Athletes: No

8. Research Procedures and Methods

8a. Recruitment and Selection of Subjects:

Participants will be invited to participate online through email and social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr. Privacy of the participants will be maintained, as

questionnaires are completely anonymous and no identifying information is collected. Participation is completely voluntary, and participants will not be coerced in any way.

Describe the criteria you will use to determine which subjects will be included and which excluded:

Any speaker of English (i.e., native speaker and L2 English learner) will be invited to participate. The questionnaire for L2 English learners targets those at least at an intermediate level of proficiency in English.

Describe any circumstances under which there could be a *perception* of consent coercion and/or undue influence by the researcher(s), and indicate how such influences will be minimized. (For example, a perception could exist whereby a PI who is recruiting study participants from students in a class taught by the PI might be able to exhibit undue influence on the students to participate in the study.) If none, please state:

None

Provide copies of all recruitment materials (study advertisements, flyers, letters, messages, emails, scripts, etc.): See Appendix D

8b. Research Location(s)

Will any portion of the research take place outside of GVSU? No

8c. Consent/Assent Process Description

Provide a description of the process for obtaining consent/assent of the subjects or their representatives:

Consent will be obtained from subjects at the beginning of the questionnaire. The first question will be the consent form, and will state: By clicking OK, I acknowledge that I am voluntarily agreeing to participate in the research as described on this form and may quit at any time without penalty.

How will you ensure that the voluntary nature of the participation is apparent to the subjects? This will be stated in the consent form and reiterated in the question in which they select OK to indicate that they give consent to participate.

How will you ensure that a subject can freely withdraw from the research aspects of the study without concern about being penalized?

This will be stated in the consent form and reiterated in the question in which they select OK to indicate that they give consent to participate. There is no way withdrawal would affect participants, as it is a completely anonymous questionnaire online.

Please provide copies of all consent/assent form(s) here: See Appendix E

8d. Nature and timing of Research Activities

Please describe the frequency and length of time subjects will be involved in the study:

Participants will participate in the online questionnaire only once, and it will take no more than 30 minutes to complete.

Describe step-by-step what will occur during your project. Include a description of the data you are collecting (i.e., the specific variables, the specific tests/surveys, data collection instruments, etc.), how it will be collected, and how it will be analyzed.

The potentially moderating variable is L2 English learners' interest in and perceived value of learning about English swearing. This will be measured by providing a few value statements at the beginning of the questionnaire such as: I feel it is important for me to learn about swearing in English, and the participant has to select Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, or Strongly Agree.

The dependent variable is learners' pragmatic swearing competence. This will be measured by a series of scenarios involving swear words, and the L2 English learners will have to rate how likely each scenario is. Their ratings will be compared against baseline native speaker data using descriptive statistics.

Has test/survey validity and/or reliability been demonstrated?

Research has been done to inform this study. Jay and Janschewitz (2008) and Kapoor's (2014) studies have been adapted. They similarly use scenarios with swear words that participants have to rate, but this study makes explicit certain variables such as social distance between speaker and listener (difference in age, gender, and social status), the type of swearing (whether *social* or *annoyance*), and the tabooeness of the swear word used (Beers-Fägersten, 2012). Additionally, a few native speakers have piloted the questionnaire and offered feedback, and changes to it have been made accordingly.

Please describe the training and experience of person(s) administering the treatment and performing the data collection and describe the relevance of this to human subjects protections:

The researcher has done the training required by the IRB, as well as taken ENG 667, which is Introduction to Applied Linguistics Research. This course emphasizes the importance of processes of ethical research. Additionally, the researcher has gone through IRB approval at GVSU with the project "Influences on the Acquisition of Swearing in an L2."

Will the subjects be compensated for their participation in the study? No

Describe the compensation (payments should be reasonable and prorated with partial payment to those who withdraw before the completion of the research):

Please provide all documents relating to data collection and/or analysis here. These could include copies of questionnaires, listing of interview questions, data collection forms, sampling and data evaluation plans, tools/measures, etc.

9. Personal identifiable information / Deception / Potential modifications

Will personal identifiable information and/or protected health information be collected during this study? This can include, but is not limited to: names, phone numbers, email addresses, medical information, educational record data, etc.: No

Select the type of personal identifiable information being collected:

None

Please indicate the other unique identifying number / characteristic / code or educational record data you will be collecting:

N/A

Describe who will have access to the data: Typically you're making clear that it is only you (and perhaps classmates, for the data you end up sharing, and perhaps your professor).

N/A

How will the personal identifiable data initially be obtained?

N/A

For how long will subjects' identifying information be linked to the data?

N/A

Where and how will the data be stored

N/A

What steps will you take to protect the data (e.g., recording security, protecting identities, etc.)?

N/A

HIPAA Forms: N/A

9b. Deception

Does this study involve the use of deception? No

9c. Potential Modifications

Do you anticipate needing future modifications to the procedures: No

Describe these potential modifications: N/A

What factors would contribute to your need to make modification? N/A

10. Risks and Benefits

10a. Risks:

There is a slight risk that participants may feel uncomfortable with the subject matter and taboo nature of the questionnaire. However, participants will be informed of the nature of the questionnaire before they begin, and will be told twice (in the consent form and in a reminder) that they have the right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

10b. Potential benefits: None

Potential benefits to society (people, academic field, etc.): Summarize what the hopeful benefits might be of this line of research. Zoom out as you think about this in a general sense.

A better understanding of L2 English users' pragmatic swearing competence and their interest and perceived value in improving this competence will lend support to the argument for teaching swearing in second language classrooms. Competence in L2 swearing is important in order for learners to be able to express themselves expertly and understand others' emotions precisely. If administrators, curriculum developers, and teachers can be convinced to incorporate swearing into L2 curriculums, then perhaps learners will better develop this competence and be more successful L2 users overall.

Appendix D

Recruitment Materials to be Posted on Social Media

Are you interested in language and/or swearing? Then consider participating in the following study. In the attached survey, you will be asked to rate the likelihood of certain scenarios in which a speaker uses a swear word, as well as asked about basic demographic information (age, nationality, etc.). Participants 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.

Appendix E

Consent Information to be Included on First Page of Questionnaire

- **TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT** L2 Swearing Pragmatics
- **PURPOSE OF STUDY** The purpose of this study is to determine what second language users of English know about swearing in English. Its goal is to develop an updated measure of swearing knowledge in order to investigate the relationship between learners' swearing knowledge and their desire to improve this knowledge.
- **REASON FOR INVITATION** You have been asked to participate because you are either
 - a native speaker of English who will provide baseline data against which to compare non-native speaker data
 - a non-native speaker of English with at least intermediate proficiency
- **PROCEDURES** Participants will be asked a series of questions in a questionnaire format, to which they should respond as honestly as they can.
- **RISKS** Participants may feel uncomfortable with the offensive language used in the questionnaire.
- **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SOCIETY** A better understanding of the potential value of second language users' swearing knowledge.
- **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 you may request that information by contacting:

Grace Irwin irwing@mail.gvsu.edu 734-660-3815

- 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:

- 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.