

SWEARING IN ENGLISH AMONG A GROUP OF FEMALE MALAYSIAN TEENAGERS

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ABSTRACT

Swearing among teenagers in the Malaysian setting is becoming normal although the Malaysian culture generally frowns on swearing. This societal phenomenon is understudied in the context of Malaysia and little is known about why teenagers swear, the kinds of swear words used, and their viewpoints of swearing. The present study was conducted on 51 female teenagers in Malaysia to investigate their swearing behaviour in English. Data was collected using a questionnaire and interviews were conducted to triangulate the findings of the questionnaire. The study showed that Malaysian female teenagers swear regularly using their favourite swearwords, *shit*, *damn*, and *hell* followed by *bitch*, *fuck* and *bullshit*. The findings show that swearing functions as a tool to deal with daily life affairs: firstly, to let off steam when experiencing negative emotions mainly anger and frustration, and secondly, to display solidarity when joking and storytelling with friends. The study shows they swear amongst themselves as girlfriends, rarely with their male friends and strangers, and seldom with parents and teachers.

Keywords: swear words; swearing; gender; Malaysian female teenagers; reasons for swearing

1. INTRODUCTION

Politeness, ethics, and appropriate use of language in communication are important in society. Swearing, specifically, is not encouraged as it makes people sound bad, harsh, and impolite. However, today, the use of swearwords in daily life and everyday conversation is rampant among teenagers and adults alike. Stenstrom (1995), for instance, analysed taboo words in The Bergen Corpus of London Teenager Language, and confirmed that teenagers swear more than adults. Swearing, even by girls, is not an issue anymore because it is perceived as normal in expressing feelings and emotions. People

swear to express anger, disappointment, frustration, happiness, excitement, and more. Research on language notes that swearing is seen as characteristic of daily language and the use of swear words in communication is a part of acquiring communicative competence (Mercury, 1995; Haron, n.d.).

Although swearing is acknowledged as common, it is nevertheless seen as offensive behaviour. Cuss Control Academy in United States, for instance, highlights that swearing imposes personal penalty, is bad for society, and can corrupt the English language. The behaviour is frowned upon by society, and in certain contexts, for instance on streets and in formal settings, is punishable by law. In Malaysia, there are laws against the use of swear words in public and formal settings and these words are censored on media especially movies. In sum, swearing is common as well as controversial. Despite swearing being a popular societal phenomenon it is understudied. In the context of Malaysia little is known about the swearing behaviour of Malaysian teenagers, both in their native languages as well as in English, the second language of the country. The present study is carried out to explore the use of English swearwords among a group of Malaysian female teenagers; what swearwords do they use, why do they swear, and what are their viewpoints of swearing.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Swearing

Andersson and Trudgill (1990: 53) define swearing as follows:

- refers to something that is taboo and/or stigmatised in the culture;
- should not be interpreted literally;
- can be used to express strong emotions and attitudes.

These three characteristics highlight the central principles of swearing that is common to all languages: it cannot function without drawing on taboo or stigmatised topics, behaviour or activities; it involves a high degree of creative or figurative use of language; and it is not commonly employed in 'neutral' speech. The behaviour includes using bad words, curse words, dirty words, four-letter words, expletives, epithets, obscenities, profanity, blasphemy, body language, foul language, vulgar language, and rude language (Jay, 2009). Rassin and Muris (2002) define swearing as the use of taboo words, the content of which can be in religion, race, gender, madness, body parts, body excretions, and body functions. They further explain that swearwords can be distinguished based on their targets. They can be general and undirected such as "goddamn", "shit", and "fuck", or they can be directed at someone or something like "damn you" and "fuck it". And finally there are swearwords that are intended to hurt or insult the addressed receiver, for instance "asshole", "idiot", and "fucker".

2.2 Related Studies

Fagersten (2000) investigated the relationship between swear word usage and social context. She conducted her study on an undergraduate student speech community of 60

members at the University of Florida, USA and found that swear word was used as a linguistic device to affirm in-group membership and that there were restrictions on the swearing behaviour of out-group members. The study also showed that there was variation in the use of and attitudes to swear words as a result of gender and race. Males imposed standards of swear word use on females and different races used swear words to fulfil different social functions.

Goodwin (2008) found that females are as good as males in swearing exchanges and that they can compete successfully with males in such exchanges. Stenstrom et al (2002) also discovered that ritual swearing not only occurs for males but also with females equally.

Haron (n.d.) explored the relationship between swearing and power in modern German, and discussed the extent to which swearing dictionaries reveal not only an interest and delight in taboo language, but also a desire to establish a regional or group identity. Although the use of swear words is perceived as negative, she found that there are contexts in which speakers swear spontaneously and strategically, and the behaviour is positively connoted.

Rassin and Muris (2005) investigated swearing behaviour of 72 female undergraduates in Netherlands and found that females swear regularly to express negative emotions although they realise that swearing is not a fruitful reaction. They also found that although swearing is connected to verbal aggression, it does not correlate with a lack of life satisfaction.

The studies above show that there is cultural variation in swearing behaviour, attitudes towards the use of swear words, and the role swearing plays in communication in different contexts and settings. The present study pursues the study of swear words by female teenagers in the context of Malaysia.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

This study used the mixed method research design. A questionnaire survey was used to collect quantitative data and a follow-up interview was used to discuss the questionnaire and the subject of swearing in greater depth. The purpose of the interview was to triangulate the findings of the questionnaire survey. See Appendix for these instruments.

3.2 Participants

Participants of the study involved 51 female students who were studying at a Malaysian secondary school in Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia. The mean age of the sample was 16.5 years. (SD=2.12; range 15-17 years). Five students from the sample were used for the interview.

3.3 Measures and Procedures

Data collection involved the respondents filling up a questionnaire constructed for the study (see Appendix). The questionnaire had three sections: choice of swear words,

reasons to swear, and viewpoints on swearing. The questionnaire was analysed using SPSS.

The interview was semi-structured and conversational (see Appendix for interview questions). It was used as triangulation for the data collected from the questionnaire in order to gain further insights about the respondents' swearing behaviour.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings show that the teenagers in the sample swear consistently. 27.5% swear daily, 21.6% swear weekly, and close to 10% swear whenever they speak. Table 1 illustrates the frequency of swearing.

Table 1: Frequency of swearing

No	ITEM	N=51	
		Frequency	%
1	Daily	14	27.5
2	Weekly	11	21.6
3	Less often than yearly	10	19.6
4	Whenever I am talking	5	9.8
5	Monthly	5	9.8
6	Never	3	5.9
7	Yearly	2	3.9
8	Hourly	1	2.0

Their favourite swear words (Table 2) were *shit* (58%), *damn* (58%) and *hell* (51%). *Bitch* (29.4%), *fuck* (19.6%), and *bullshit* (19.6%) were their subsequent favourite words.

Table 2: Favourite swear words

No	ITEM	YES - n(%)	NO - n(%)
1	Shit	30 (58)	21 (41.2)
2	Damn	30 (58)	21 (41.2)
3	Hell	26 (51)	25 (49)
4	Bitch	15 (29.4)	36 (70.6)
5	Fuck	10 (19.6)	41 (80.4)
6	Bullshit	10 (19.6)	41 (80.4)
7	Suck	9 (17.6)	42 (82.4)
8	My ass	5 (9.8)	46 (90.2)
9	Pig	4 (7.8)	47 (92.2)
10	Mother fucker	2 (3.9)	49 (96.1)

The data (Table 3) showed that the respondents swear mainly to express negative emotions. 80.4% swear to express anger, 76.6% to express frustration, 37.3% to express pain, and 35.3% to express shock. They swear for positive reasons as well, particularly

when they joke, 78.4%. The interview revealed that swearing helps them in reducing pain and dealing with their emotions. They noted that they used swear words for joking and storytelling and some feel that swearing can make them look cool and part of the group. The data showed they also swear to emphasise a point (21.6%) and when they are excited (7.8%). They rarely use swearwords for sexual reasons.

Table 3: Causes of swearing

No	ITEM	YES - n(%)	NO - n(%)
1	Anger	41 (80.4)	10 (19.6)
2	Frustration	39 (76.5)	12 (23.5)
3	Pain	19 (37.3)	32 (62.7)
4	Shock	18 (35.3)	33 (64.7)
5	Emphasize a point	11 (21.60)	40 (78.4)
6	Joke	40 (78.4)	11 (21.6)
7	Excited	4 (7.8)	47 (92.2)
8.	Make sexual references	3 (5.9)	48 (94.1)

The study showed that the respondents have positive feelings when they swear with 54.9% feeling energized, 21.5% feel cool, and 11.8% feel awesome (see Table 4). This shows a link to the finding about the positive and negative reasons for swearing discussed above in Table 3.

Table 4: Impact of swearing

No	ITEM	N=51	
		Frequency	%
1	Energized	28	54.9
2	Cool	11	21.5
3	Awesome	6	11.8
4	Depressed	4	7.8
5	Guilty	1	2.0
6	Sad	1	2.0

The data (Table 5) showed that the respondents swear with their female friends (i.e. same gender) and less with their male friends (i.e. opposite gender). 82.3% swear as usual with their female friends. 51% do not swear with their male friends while 33.3% swear less than usual. The respondents also do not swear with strangers, both males and females. 90.2% do not swear with male strangers and 86.3% do not swear with female strangers. The study also shows the majority of respondents do not swear at home (60.8%) and at school (74.5%).

Table 5: Swearing Counterparts

No	ITEM	N=51			
		Not at all n(%)	Less than usual n(%)	As usual n(%)	More than usual n(%)
1	With male friends only	26 (51)	17 (33.3)	7 (13.7)	1 (2.0)
2	With female friends only	2 (3.9)	5 (9.8)	42 (82.3)	2 (3.9)
3	With male strangers only	46 (90.2)	1 (2.0)	2 (3.9)	2 (3.9)
4	With female strangers only	44 (86.3)	2 (3.9)	3 (5.9)	2 (3.9)
5.	At school	38 (74.5)	9 (17.6)	4 (7.8)	0
6.	At home	31 (60.8)	11 (21.6)	2 (3.9)	1 (2.0)

When they swear, most of them do so as loud as ordinary conversation (47.1%) while some swear quieter than normal speech (27.5%) (see Table 6). The study also showed that the respondents learnt the swear words from their fellow friends (80.4%) and from movies (78.4%) (see Table 7). Drama series (37.7%) and celebrities (37.7%) were the other two sources of influence. The interview data revealed that the respondents' favourite television programs were *Glee*, *Desperate Housewives*, *CSI*, and *House*. Although the conversations on these programs are censored on Malaysian TV, they are easily accessible through the internet and may have had an influence on the swearing behaviour of teenagers as noted by Coyne (2011) that media is the biggest promoter of the use of bad words among adolescents.

Table 6: Loudness of swearing

No	ITEM	N=51	
		Frequency	%
1	As loud as ordinary conversation	24	47.1
2	Quieter than ordinary conversation	14	27.5
3	Louder than ordinary conversation	9	17.6
4	I don't swear	4	7.8

Table 7: Learning swear words

No	ITEM	YES- n(%)	NO-n(%)
1	Friends	41 (80.4)	10 (19.6)
2	Movies	40 (78.4)	11 (21.6)
3	Drama series	19 (37.7)	32 (62.7)
4	Celebrities	19 (37.7)	32 (62.7)
5	Strangers	12 (23.5)	39 (76.5)
6	Cartoons	10 (19.6)	41 (80.4)
7	Parents	3 (5.9)	48 (94.1)

The majority of respondents (94.1%) view swearing as bad ranging from extremely bad to somewhat bad (see Table 8). The interview data showed teenagers viewed the words as bad because they are, in fact, bad words, but their use in conversation is normal as a medium to express feelings and emotions. They also feel that using the swear words are alright because they use the words only among themselves and not with parents and teachers.

Table 8: Opinions on swearing

No	ITEM	N=51	
		Frequency	%
1	Extremely bad	14	27.5
2	Very bad	14	27.5
3	Moderately bad	7	13.7
4	Somewhat bad	7	13.7
5	A little bad	6	11.8
6	Not too bad at all	2	3.9
8	Normal	1	2.0

5. CONCLUSION

In summary, the findings show that Malaysian female teenagers swear quite regularly. Their favourite swearwords are *shit*, *damn*, and *hell* followed by *bitch*, *fuck* and *bullshit*. Although they realise using swearwords is generally bad they have no qualms in using the words in their communication. The findings show that swearing is used by the sample as a tool to deal with daily life affairs. They swear primarily to let off steam when experiencing negative emotions mainly anger and frustration, and probably feel energised when they do so. This shows that swearing gives them an outlet to deal with their negative feelings. They also use swearwords in positive circumstances mainly when joking and storytelling with friends, and this may be associated to feeling cool and awesome in their efforts to display solidarity and to fit in with the group. They swear amongst themselves as girlfriends, rarely with their male friends and strangers, and seldom with parents and teachers.

Future research is needed to further investigate swearing behaviour of females; teenage girls as well as women in other age groups should be studied for further insights. Comparison with males to explore possible sex differences in the use of swearwords is also an avenue for further research. Qualitative analysis of swearwords through discourse approaches would also give depth into swearing behaviour of genders.

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Bionote:

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APPENDIX

**QUESTIONNAIRE
SWEARING AMONG TEENAGERS IN MALAYSIA**

This study looks at the use of swearing among Malaysian teenagers. Specifically, this study investigates the choice of swear words used, the reasons for swearing and teenagers' viewpoints about swearing.

SECTION A: DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Age : _____

Form

Form 1 ()

Form 2 ()

Form 3 ()

Form 4 ()

Form 5 ()

SECTION B:

CHOICE OF SWEAR WORDS

1. What are your favourite swear words?

Fuck () My ass ()

Bullshit () Shit ()

Mother fucker () Dick ()

Scumbag () Suck ()

Pig () Damn ()

Bitch () Hell ()

Others: _____

2. How often do you swear?
- | | |
|------------------------|-----|
| Whenever I am talking | () |
| Hourly | () |
| Daily | () |
| Weekly | () |
| Monthly | () |
| Yearly | () |
| Less often than yearly | () |
| Never | () |

3. Where do you learn swear words?
- | | |
|--------------|-----|
| Parents | () |
| Friends | () |
| Strangers | () |
| Celebrities | () |
| Movies | () |
| Drama series | () |
| Cartoons | () |
| Drama | () |
- Others: _____

4. How loud is your swearing?
- | | |
|------------------------------------|-----|
| Quieter than ordinary conversation | () |
| As loud as ordinary conversation | () |
| Louder than ordinary conversation | () |
| I don't swear | () |

REASONS TO SWEAR

5. What most cause you to swear?
- | | |
|---------------------------|-----|
| Pain | () |
| Anger | () |
| Frustration | () |
| To emphasize a point | () |
| To joke | () |
| To make sexual references | () |
| Happy | () |
| Excited | () |
| Shock | () |
- Others: _____

6. Do you swear? If you answer 'no', why do you avoid it?

- I don't see any need of using it ()
 Religious reasons ()
 Family ()
 All the above ()
 Other: _____

7. If you say 'yes' in question 6, why do you swear?

- I like it, It makes me feel good, cool ()
 Many of my friends use it ()
 All the above ()
 Others: _____

8. How much do you use swear words when you are*

	Not at all	Less than usual	As usual	More than usual
With male friends only	()	()	()	()
With female friends only	()	()	()	()
With male strangers only	()	()	()	()
With female strangers only	()	()	()	()
At school	()	()	()	()
At home	()	()	()	()

VIEWPOINTS IN SWEARING

9. In your opinion, how bad is swearing?

- Extremely bad ()
 Very bad ()
 Moderately bad ()
 Somewhat bad ()
 A little bad ()
 Not bad at all ()
 Normal ()

10. What do you feel when you swear?

- Energized ()
 Cool ()
 Awesome ()
 Depressed ()
 Guilty ()
 Happy ()
 Sad ()

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

When did you start swearing?

What words do you use when swearing?

Do you hear your friends swear? When?

Do you hear your parents swear? When?

How do you swear?

When do you swear?

What words do you use when you swear?

Did you learn swear words from your parents?

Did you learn swear words from your friends?

Did you learn swear words from the media?

How does swearing affect the relationship of your parents and friends with you?

How do you feel when you swear? (Do you feel cool, awesome and up- to- date when swearing?)

Do you feel guilty when you swear?

How do you react when your parents and friends swear? Why?

Do you like it when people swear to you?

What do you understand by swearing?

What are your viewpoints on swearing?

How does swearing affect your life?