

**EXPLORING THE USE OF ENGLISH CURSE WORDS IN
EVERYDAY COMMUNICATION AMONG EFL STUDENTS**

THESIS

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AR-RANIRY STATE ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY
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COMMUNICATION AMONG EFL STUDENTS**

THESIS

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As One of the Requirements to Obtain a Bachelor's Degree
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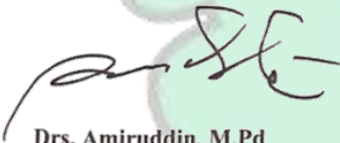
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Exploring the Use of English Course Words in Everyday Communication Among EFL Students

THESIS

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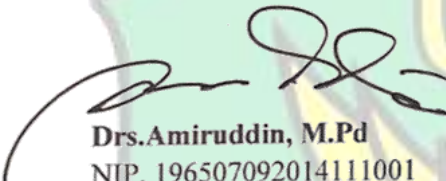
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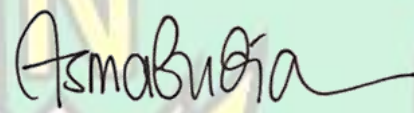
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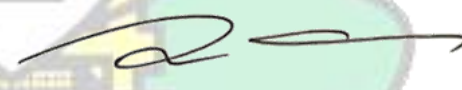

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**"Exploring The Use of English Curse Words in Everyday Communication
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Adalah benar-benar karya saya, kecuali semua kutipan dan referensi yang disebutkan sumbernya. Apabila terdapat kesalahan dan kekeliruan di dalamnya. Maka akan sepenuhnya menjadi tanggung jawab saya. Demikianlah surat pernyataan ini saya buat dengan sesungguhnya.

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ABSTRACT

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This study explores the use of English Curse Words in everyday communication and among EFL (English as a foreign language) students. Although often considered taboo and rude, students frequently use curse words in informal interactions, particularly in conversations with friends and digital communication. The purpose of this study is to understand why students frequently use such curse words, the situations in which they arise, and how students perceive the level of politeness and emotional impact of such profanity. Data was collected through an essay questionnaire distributed to EFL students at one of the universities, UIN Ar-Raniry. The results of the study indicate that most participants are familiar with vulgar words in English, primarily through exposure to films, music, and social media. Students reported using these words for various reasons, such as expressing strong emotions, building social closeness, imitating native speakers, or following trends. However, many also admitted to being unsure about when and where these words are appropriate to use, indicating a lack of pragmatic competence. This study concludes that the use of curse words in English by EFL students is influenced not only by linguistic input but also by cultural adaptation and identity formation. The study emphasizes the importance of increasing pragmatic awareness in language learning so that students can distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate language use in various communication contexts.

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In the end, the researcher understands that this study is not without flaws. Therefore, any constructive feedback and suggestions are warmly welcomed to help improve this work. It is also the researcher's hope that this study may bring benefits to the readers and offer valuable insights for all related stakeholders.

Banda Aceh, 1 Agustus 2025

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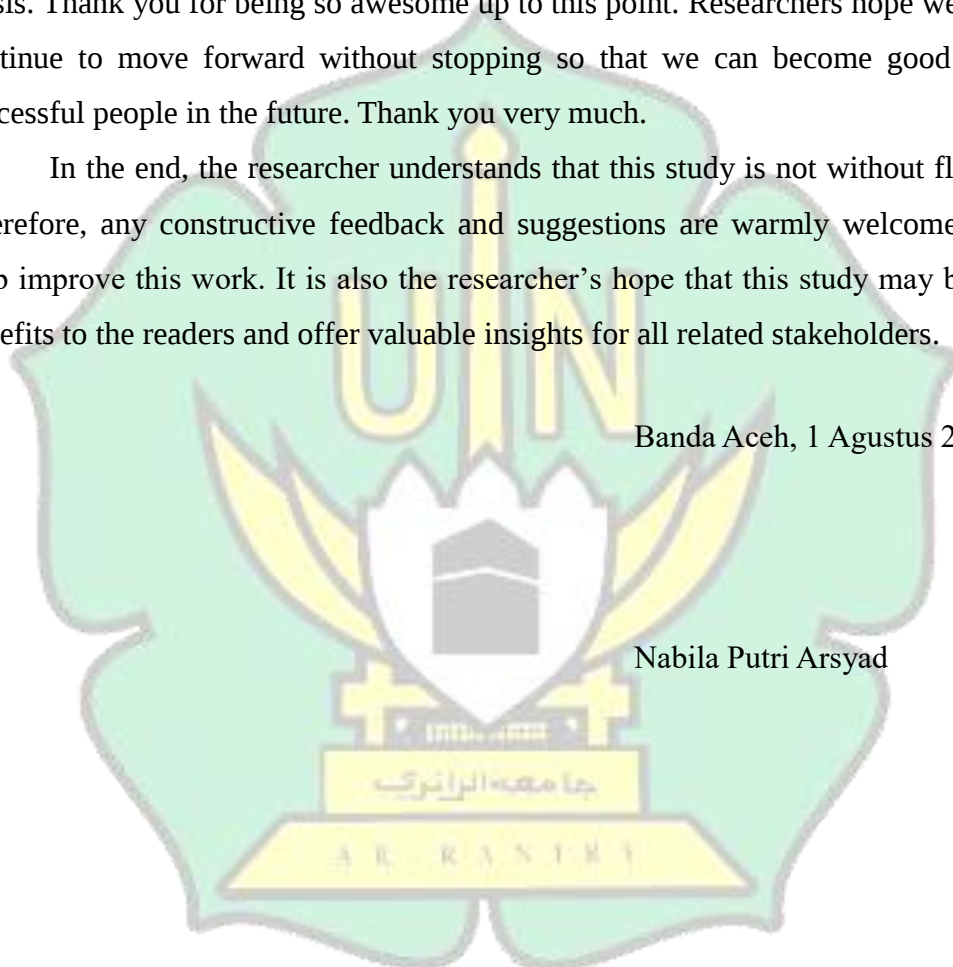


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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. Background of Study

Language is a crucial tool for human interaction, allowing individuals to communicate, express thoughts and emotions, and construct social identities. Within this broad scope, swearing particularly the use of profanity represents one of the most controversial aspects of language use. Although vulgar expressions are often perceived as rude or offensive, they also serve various linguistic and social functions, such as expressing strong emotions, creating humor, and strengthening group solidarity (Deckker, 2025). In English, profanity may function as humor, emotional release, or even positive evaluation. Thus, its meaning varies depending on the context.

For English as a foreign language (EFL) learners, however, understanding the nuances of profanity presents unique challenges. Unlike native speakers, who intuitively recognize when and how swearing is appropriate, EFL learners must navigate informal language and taboos without explicit instruction. This study highlights the importance of examining how EFL students incorporate swear words into daily communication. With the rapid spread of digital media, learners are increasingly exposed to informal English expressions through films, music, television, and social platforms. Yet, when acquired indirectly, such expressions may be misunderstood, leading to uncertainty about their functions, connotations, and potential offensiveness.

Previous research has shown that profanity fulfills diverse social roles. For example, Stapleton (2010) conducted research in Ireland and found that swearing often strengthens social bonds rather than merely expressing hostility. Similarly, Dewaele (2018) examined multilingual speakers and revealed that individuals often feel emotionally detached when swearing in a non-native language. This suggests that the emotional value and cultural meaning of profanity may not

transfer across languages, making EFL learners' usage either limited or excessive compared to native speakers. While these studies provide meaningful insights, there is still limited research focusing specifically on EFL learners and their adaptation to profanity in English.

The present study seeks to address this gap by exploring how EFL students use profanity in everyday communication. Investigating their motivations, perceptions, and usage patterns can enhance our understanding of informal language acquisition. Moreover, the findings can assist educators in recognizing the role of informal expressions and taboos in real-world communication. Rather than ignoring profanity altogether, language teachers can provide guidance on its pragmatic functions, cultural variations, and potential risks. This approach not only raises students' linguistic awareness but also equips them with the skills necessary to navigate authentic communication more effectively.

Ultimately, acknowledging the role of swearing in language use can help bridge the gap between classroom instruction and everyday interaction. Such recognition enables learners to develop not only linguistic proficiency but also cultural competence in their second language. While profanity is often stigmatized, its study reveals important insights into identity, group cohesion, and intercultural communication topics that deserve greater academic attention in the context of EFL learning.

B. Research Questions

1. What are the main reasons of PBI students to use curse words in daily communication?
2. How do PBI students perceive the appropriateness of using curse words in different social and academic contexts?

C. Research Aims

1. To identify the main reasons why PBI students use curse words in daily communication.

2. To examine PBI students' perception of appropriateness in different social and academic contexts

D. Significance of the Study

1. Academic

This research focuses on the daily use of curse words. Academics highlighting sociolinguistics and pragmatics in curse words is very important. This will help to understand how an understanding of language variation and social context affects language use.

2. Social

Since curse words are related to social and cultural norms, knowing the impact of social identity and interpersonal relationships is also very important among students. This will provide knowledge about the role of language in shaping social dynamics in the campus environment.

E. Terminology

1. English Curse Words

In this study, English curse words are defined as taboo or offensive expressions that, despite often being considered inappropriate, serve important pragmatic functions in communication. They can be used to express strong emotions, intensify statements, or establish solidarity within a group. Their interpretation and acceptability largely depend on cultural norms, social contexts, and the relationships between speakers. Thus, curse words should not only be viewed as negative expressions but also as meaningful communicative tools (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008).

2. Everyday Communication

Everyday communication refers to informal spoken or written interactions that occur in daily life, such as conversations with friends, classroom discussions, or exchanges on social media. Research shows that exposure to English in everyday contexts outside the classroom significantly supports language development, as it provides authentic

opportunities for practice that are often more flexible and meaningful than formal settings (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016).

3. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Students

EFL students are individuals who learn English in contexts where it is not the primary language of communication. Their exposure to informal English, including taboo expressions, often occurs through media, online interactions, or personal experiences. According to Dewaele (2004), second language learners typically perceive curse words with less emotional intensity than native speakers. This finding emphasizes the importance of cultural and emotional factors in shaping how EFL students comprehend and use such expressions.



CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Definition and Classification of Curse Words

Profanity, often referred to as curse words or swear words, is an important yet frequently overlooked component of human language and communication. Although commonly associated with vulgarity and offensive behavior, profanity serves a range of functions that extend beyond simply expressing rudeness or hostility. From a linguistic perspective, curse words form a unique category of language closely tied to emotion, culture, and social interaction. Their use demonstrates that language is not only a vehicle for transmitting information but also a means of expressing feelings and reinforcing relationships.

In many cases, profanity functions as a tool for emotional regulation. Research in psychology and linguistics has shown that swearing can help individuals cope with stress, frustration, or even physical pain. For example, Stephens et al. (2020) found that people who swear in stressful or painful situations often experience emotional relief, suggesting that profanity can serve as a form of catharsis that reduces tension. This indicates that swearing is not always harmful; in certain contexts, it may even contribute to mental and emotional well-being.

Beyond its psychological role, profanity also plays a significant part in social communication. It can be used to build intimacy, create humor, or signal group membership. Within informal communities, swearing may function as a marker of solidarity and belonging, helping individuals strengthen social bonds. However, profanity remains highly context-dependent. What is acceptable in one cultural or social environment may be considered inappropriate in another, highlighting its fluid and context-sensitive nature (Bednarek, 2019).

To better understand this complexity, scholars have classified profanity into categories based on its purpose and use. One framework distinguishes between expletive cursing, abusive cursing, humorous cursing, and auxiliary cursing. This classification underscores that profanity is not random or meaningless; rather, it represents a structured use of language that fulfills specific psychological, social, and linguistic functions (Dewaele, 2020). Examining these categories allows researchers and educators to gain a more nuanced understanding of how swearing operates in everyday life and across different linguistic communities.

a. Expletive cursing

Expletive cursing refers to the use of swear words that are not directed at others but are instead employed to express the speaker's emotions, such as anger, surprise, or frustration. Common examples include spontaneous utterances like *hell!*, *shit!*, or *goddamn it!* used in reaction to stressful or unexpected situations. The purpose of this type of swearing is not to insult or harm others but to release tension and provide emotional relief. Research has shown that swearing in this way can help individuals cope with pain or stress by triggering a natural stress response that enhances resilience (Stephens et al., 2020). In short, expletive cursing functions as an emotional outlet rather than a form of verbal aggression.

b. Abusive cursing

Abusive cursing refers to the use of profanity that is directly targeted at others with the intention of insulting, humiliating, or expressing hostility. Unlike expletive cursing, which functions as an outlet for personal emotions, abusive cursing serves as a verbal attack and is therefore more offensive in nature. Examples include expressions such as *go to hell!*, *you bastard!*, or *you asshole!*, which are commonly used to provoke or degrade someone during moments of conflict or anger. This type of swearing can escalate tensions in social interactions and strain interpersonal relationships, particularly when used repeatedly or aggressively. Research on verbal aggression has shown that abusive cursing can

harm group cohesion and reinforce negative stereotypes, making it one of the most socially sensitive forms of profanity (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008).

c. Humorous cursing

Humorous cursing refers to the use of profanity in a playful or lighthearted manner, where the intention is not to offend but to create amusement, emphasize a point, or foster closeness among speakers. Unlike abusive cursing, which functions as a verbal attack, humorous cursing is typically employed among friends or within informal contexts where social bonds are already established, making it less likely to be perceived as harmful. An example is the expression *get your ass in gear!*, which in certain contexts may be interpreted as teasing rather than a genuine insult. Humorous cursing can reduce social distance, reinforce group identity, and elicit laughter, illustrating how taboo language can generate positive interpersonal effects when used appropriately (Dyrel, 2012).

d. Auxiliary cursing

Auxiliary cursing refers to the use of taboo words not to target people or specific situations, but to add emphasis to everyday expressions. In this form, curse words function as intensifiers, strengthening the emotional tone of a sentence without necessarily conveying hostility. For example, phrases such as *this f**king book* or *that bloody mess* illustrate how profanity is embedded in speech to express frustration, surprise, or casual emphasis. This type of cursing is sometimes labeled as “lazy speaking” because it replaces more precise vocabulary with emotionally charged fillers. Nevertheless, auxiliary cursing remains a common feature of informal communication, reflecting how profanity evolves to serve multiple pragmatic functions (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008).

The classification of curse words is crucial in understanding their role in communication. It helps linguists and educators determine how these words are learned, used, and perceived by different groups, including EFL students. Since learning a language involves not just formal structures but also informal and

expressive elements, understanding curse words can provide deeper insights into language acquisition and cultural adaptation.

B. The Role of Curse Words in Language and Communication

Profanity, or the use of curse words, represents a surprisingly complex aspect of human communication. Although often dismissed as vulgar or inappropriate, linguistic and psychological research has revealed that profanity carries diverse and meaningful functions. Far from being meaningless outbursts, curse words can serve as emotional release, facilitate social bonding, and act as rhetorical devices that enhance communication. In this way, profanity enriches human expression by adding emotional intensity and nuance that ordinary vocabulary often cannot achieve.

One of the most prominent functions of profanity lies in its role as an outlet for emotions. Individuals frequently resort to cursing when experiencing pain, stress, or frustration, using it as a natural coping mechanism. Studies indicate that swearing can increase pain tolerance by triggering physiological responses similar to those activated in the body's fight-or-flight system. Thus, profanity not only offers psychological relief but also produces tangible physical effects, making it a uniquely effective form of emotional regulation in moments of anger, surprise, or discomfort (Speakman, 2025).

Beyond individual regulation, profanity also plays a crucial role in shaping social interactions. Within many peer groups, cursing strengthens solidarity and fosters a sense of closeness. When used in a playful or humorous manner, curse words can signal intimacy, equality, and trust, breaking down formal barriers between speakers. However, this social function is context-dependent. While profanity may be normalized and even valued in certain cultural or informal settings, in other contexts it may be judged as impolite, unprofessional, or offensive (Smith, 2024).

From a linguistic perspective, curse words function as powerful tools of emphasis. They allow speakers to intensify messages, highlight emotions, and enhance the expressiveness of their speech. This rhetorical quality makes profanity especially effective in storytelling, humor, and moments of heightened emotion. By deliberately breaking the conventions of polite discourse, curse words provide speakers with a concise yet impactful means of conveying strong feelings, functioning as linguistic shortcuts to authenticity and passion.

Nevertheless, the use of profanity is not without drawbacks. In professional or formal settings, frequent swearing may be perceived as disrespectful or unrefined, potentially resulting in negative evaluations. Moreover, excessive use can diminish the intensity of curse words, reducing their communicative impact when truly needed. As such, the effectiveness of profanity relies heavily on context, moderation, and audience awareness.

In conclusion, profanity should not be dismissed as mere “bad language.” Rather, it constitutes a versatile communicative resource with functions ranging from emotional release and social bonding to rhetorical emphasis. When employed appropriately, curse words enrich human interaction, strengthen relational ties, and provide a raw, immediate channel for emotional expression. A deeper understanding of profanity thus highlights its multifaceted role in language and its reflection of the profound connection between words, emotions, and social dynamics.

C. The Use of English Curse Words in Language and Communication

Cursing words, commonly referred to as *swear words* or *profanity*, represent integral elements of human language and communication. Their use extends across cultural and linguistic boundaries, reflecting both personal expression and broader social conventions. Far from being mere markers of vulgarity, curse words fulfill diverse functions, ranging from emotional release and rhetorical emphasis to social bonding and identity construction. This section explores the multifaceted roles of profanity, with particular attention to its

prevalence, cultural implications, and the shifting perceptions that shape how such language is understood and employed in different contexts.

a. Prevalence and Sociolinguistic Patterns

Cursing is a ubiquitous phenomenon in everyday interactions. Research indicates that taboo language accounts for approximately 4% to 13% of daily speech, underscoring its natural integration into human communication (Jay, 2009). The frequency and contextual use of cursing are shaped by various sociolinguistic factors, such as age, gender, and social status. For example, studies suggest that males tend to employ stronger swear words compared to females, a tendency that may be explained through evolutionary perspectives linking male behavior to intergroup competitiveness and aggressiveness (Stephens & Umland, 2011).

b. Social Functions and Contextual Variability

The use of curse words fulfills several important social functions, ranging from the expression of strong emotions to the reinforcement of group identity. Cursing often serves as a coping mechanism for stress or pain, functioning as an emotional outlet that facilitates psychological relief (Stephens et al., 2009). In addition, within certain social contexts, profanity can strengthen interpersonal bonds, acting as a marker of solidarity and group belonging (Baruch & Jenkins, 2020). Nonetheless, the appropriateness and interpretation of cursing remain highly context-dependent, varying significantly across cultures and social settings. For instance, particular curse words may be perceived as highly offensive in some cultures while relatively mild in others, reflecting the influence of differing societal norms and value systems (Dewaele, 2018).

c. Impact on Language Learning and Communication

The presence of curse words in language poses unique challenges and considerations for language learners. Understanding the nuances of profanity is essential for achieving communicative competence, since misuse can result in misunderstandings or social faux pas (Jay &

Janschewitz, 2008). Moreover, educators face the dilemma of whether and how to address taboo language in the classroom, as they must balance the goal of providing comprehensive language education with the risk of implicitly endorsing inappropriate speech (Dewaele, 2018). Without proper contextualization, exposure to profanity may lead to embarrassing or even potentially harmful situations for learners, thereby underscoring the need for culturally informed approaches to language instruction (Jay, 2009).

d. Evolving Perceptions and Media Influence

The perception and acceptability of curse words have evolved over time, shaped by both media representation and broader societal changes. Recent studies indicate notable shifts in the frequency and intensity of profanity in everyday interactions, reflecting changing attitudes toward taboo language (McEnery & Xiao, 2020). Media platforms, particularly television and social media, play a crucial role in either normalizing or stigmatizing the use of specific curse words. For example, the increased presence of previously taboo expressions in mainstream media illustrates the dynamic nature of language and its responsiveness to shifting social norms (Baruch & Jenkins, 2020).

D. Cultural and Social Perceptions of Curse Words

a. Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Curse Words

Perceptions of curse words vary significantly across cultures. For instance, terms associated with religious sanctity may be regarded as highly offensive in one country, while in another, they may be embedded in everyday language. This illustrates that verbal taboos are not universal but are instead shaped by cultural experiences and local moral frameworks (Davani, Díaz, Baker, & Prabhakaran, 2023). Moreover, research indicates that individual moral values such as the emphasis on care for others and the importance of purity substantially influence how offensive a word is perceived within a given culture. This underscores the

need to approach curse words with sensitivity to both moral orientations and sociocultural norms (Davani et al., 2023).

b. Cultural Variations in Perceptions of Offensiveness

A single word may be considered mild in one culture but deeply offensive in another, depending on differing moral interpretations. For example, terms related to bodily functions may be perceived as relatively neutral in some societies but regarded as taboo in cultures that place a strong emphasis on modesty (Davani et al., 2023). Furthermore, the concept of covert prestige in the use of cursing illustrates these social variations. Within certain groups such as close friends or coworkers profanity can function as a means of fostering intimacy or signaling loyalty, even though such language may generally be deemed inappropriate in broader society (Davani et al., 2023).

c. Cross-Cultural Linguistic Studies

Comparative linguistic studies demonstrate that curse words do not take a single, universal form across languages. Research on swearing across linguistic communities shows that the types and functions of profanity are deeply shaped by each community's historical background and cultural practices (FasterCapital, 2025). Consequently, both researchers and educators must remain attentive to cultural nuances when studying or teaching taboo language. Instead of applying a one-size-fits-all standard, it is essential to adopt a culturally sensitive approach that recognizes local meanings and social contexts (FasterCapital, 2025).

d. Influence of Media and Societal Changes

Modern media and societal changes also play a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of curse words. Studies indicate that exposure to profanity in television, film, and social media can influence how acceptable or common such language is judged within different contexts (Coyne, Stockdale, Nelson, & Fraser, 2011). Yet, it is not merely exposure but also interpretation and imitation that determine impact. Social learning theory suggests that while children and adolescents may adopt curse words from media, the influence of family and peers

in modeling this behavior tends to be stronger and more enduring (Coyne et al., 2011).

E.Previous Studies on Curse Word Usage among English Foreign Language Learners

The exploration of curse word usage among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners has garnered scholarly attention, reflecting the intricate relationship between language acquisition, cultural norms, and individual expression. This section delves into empirical studies that investigate how EFL learners perceive, acquire, and utilize swear words, shedding light on the pedagogical implications and sociolinguistic dynamics involved.

1. Perceptions and Attitudes Towards Curse Words

Understanding EFL students' perceptions of curse words is essential in identifying their usage patterns. A study conducted by Berowa, Ella, and Lucas (2019) found that cultural context plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions of politeness certain words are considered highly offensive depending on local norms. Moreover, gender differences were observed, with male students showing greater tolerance toward offensive language compared to female students (Berowa et al., 2019). These findings highlight the importance of considering both cultural and gender dimensions in EFL instruction. Ignoring these factors could lead to a lack of sensitivity in classroom practices and fail to reflect the linguistic realities learners encounter in everyday communication.

2. Frequency and Context of Curse Word Usage

Examining the frequency and context in which students employ curse words provides valuable insight into their pragmatic competence. A case study by Saputra (2024) on Indonesian English literature students revealed that negative emotions, particularly anger, were the primary triggers for using curse words. Notably, many participants reported experiencing emotional relief after cursing, suggesting that this practice functions as a coping mechanism. Thus, learners' use of curse words should not be viewed solely as impoliteness but also as an adaptive

response to communication dynamics. Moreover, it reflects students' attempts to mirror the spontaneous and informal communication styles of native speakers in real-life interactions.

3. Curse Word Acquisition Among Young Learners

The acquisition and use of curse words among young EFL learners provide important insights into language socialization and peer influence. Suganob-Nicolau (2016) found that anger was the primary emotional trigger for children's use of curse words, with terms rooted in intellectual and religious contexts appearing most frequently. Moreover, many children acquired such expressions from peers and media, emphasizing the influence of informal interaction and external exposure in shaping linguistic development. These findings indicate that language acquisition extends beyond formal instruction and is profoundly shaped by social and cultural environments. The adoption of curse words among children, therefore, illustrates how community-based practices contribute to the formation of linguistic behavior.

4. Implications for EFL Teaching Practices

The integration of taboo language into EFL classrooms has sparked ongoing debate among educators. Martinez (2021) highlighted the importance of addressing taboo words and cursing within language teaching, arguing that exclusive focus on formal registers may leave learners underprepared for authentic communication. Incorporating discussions of curse words into the curriculum can therefore enhance learners' pragmatic competence and cultural awareness. Such an approach equips students to navigate everyday spoken English more effectively and to adapt their language use across diverse social contexts.

5. Gender Differences in Curse Word Usage

The integration of taboo language into EFL classrooms remains a contested issue among educators. Martinez (2021) argued that neglecting taboo words and cursing while focusing solely on formal registers may leave learners

underprepared for authentic communication. Incorporating discussions of such expressions into the curriculum can enhance learners' pragmatic competence and cultural awareness, thereby equipping them to communicate more effectively and adaptively in everyday spoken English.

