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# **Linguistic Taboos and Swear Words in EFL Learning and Teaching: An Empirical Study**

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## **Abstract**

A taboo word is a word that should be avoided because it is considered to be wrong, embarrassing or unpleasant (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). A swear word is a word that is also considered rude and offensive according to the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.). Despite the negative emotional features that these words might have, they are very present in everyday life. However, taboo and swear words are not present in the classroom curriculum as revealed by Holster (2005) who gathered the opinions and attitudes of ESL teachers towards teaching taboo or swear words in the classroom and showed that the majority of the instructors did not address them in that context. Consequently, L2 speakers do not generally acquire these words in ESL classrooms.

Yet, these words need to be taught to students for two main reasons. Firstly, the students might feel the need to use them in many situations such as socialising with native speakers and expressing their feelings. Secondly, swear words and taboo words (usually referred to under the term S-T words) have a very strong emotional force and L2 speakers might not be aware of their weight resulting in possible misunderstandings with native speakers.

The main goal of this paper is to gather information about the knowledge and attitudes of EFL students towards S-T words in their L1 and English. In order to do so, I conducted a study in which I analysed the responses of 320 high school EFL students in the Basque Autonomous Community regarding S-T words in English, Basque and Spanish. The study showed that participants with higher proficiency in English were more aware of the consequences of using S-T words and their emotional force in the L1 than in the L2. It was also noticeable that S-T words in English were mostly learned with friends, on social media, watching TV and listening to music. The paper concludes with some practical materials to work on S-T words in the classroom and a study plan based on Kaduce and Metzger (2019).

**Keywords:** taboo words, swear words, emotional force, L1, EFL

## 1. Introduction

Language is an essential communication system that people use to express their opinions, feelings and thoughts and, without it, it would be very difficult to make others understand our intentions. The use of taboo words and swear words play an important part in communicating opinions, feelings and thoughts.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) the word *taboo* refers to “something that you should not say or do because people generally think it is morally wrong, unpleasant, or embarrassing”. In this line, Gao (2013) follows Wardhaugh’s definition (2000) that taboo words are words which are prohibited or avoided by a society because their use could provoke shame, embarrassment or anxiety. The reasons why some words are considered to be taboo are not always clear. In fact, according to Jay (2009) and Dewaele (2018) whether a word or an expression is considered taboo depends on the attitude that people who belong in a group or society have towards that word or expression, which means that only the people from that community know exactly what is considered taboo and what is not. In general, among the taboo subjects are those that refer to the private parts of the body, illnesses and death, sex and salary (Gao, 2013).

Swear words are very similar to taboo words. According to Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.), swear words are very offensive or rude words about sex and body, among others. Both linguistic taboos and swear words are frequently used to express emotions and strong feelings in situations where the speaker feels angry or frustrated (Chen, 1999, as cited in Holster, 2005, p32; Horan, 2013). Since both swear words and taboo words assume emotional attitudes (Dewaele, 2004), both terms are grouped together in the same category and are referred to as S-T words.

S-T words are part of everyday life. For instance, according to Howe (2012, as cited in Wedlock, 2020, p34), “the word *fuck* is one of the most commonly spoken and most versatile words in the English language”. Moreover, Jay (2009) adds that a person uses around 80-90 taboo words per day based on estimated spoken word rates. However, not everybody uses the same taboo words. For instance, Stenstrom (1995, as cited in Dewaele, 2004) noticed that teenagers and adults used different taboo words. In the case of teenagers, they usually used words related to sex and drinking, while adults uttered words derived from religious subjects. She also observed that there is a generational difference in the use of taboo words. In particular, she showed that teenagers appeared to swear more

than adults, which could be related to the teenagers' need to establish group identity through this kind of language. While there are some cultural differences regarding what is and what is not taboo, there are words which are mostly commonly considered taboo, as it is the case of female body parts, which are universally considered indecent (Stapleton, 2003, as cited in Bulusan, 2019).

When people want to talk about unpleasant topics without creating embarrassing situations, euphemisms are frequently used. These words protect someone's feelings (Gao, 2013; Finn, 2017) and are used when the speakers want to avoid using the taboo words. For instance, instead of saying *poor* or *be broke*, which could be offensive to some people, we could say *in an awkward financial situation* (Gao, 2013). Euphemisms for body parts and bodily functions are part of everyday speech (Engkent, 1986). However, the existence of these alternative words or expressions does not mean that taboo language will disappear:

Despite the censoring of language, taboo words will persist in the community's lexicon because they strengthen the social fabric and group identity through the feeling of sharing one's socio-cultural and belief system (Quanbar, 2011 as cited in Bulusan, 2019, p149)

In EFL (English as a Foreign Language) settings, S-T words tend to be avoided. One of the main reasons why they are not usually taught is because EFL instructors usually focus on a formal and a more "neutral" register of English, and S-T words are not formal nor neutral. Against this backdrop, in section 2, I will address the importance of teaching and learning S-T words in the EFL classroom. In section 3, I will summarise the attitudes towards teaching S-T words in the classroom and then, in section 4, I will discuss the emotional force of S-T words in the L1 and the L2. In the main part of this paper, I will present a study I conducted in a high school of the Basque Autonomous Community to find out how secondary students of EFL feel about S-T words in their L1s and in English. The study also investigates their stance on teaching and learning S-T words in the ESL classroom (section 5). In the last part of the paper, section 6, I will summarise a unit plan proposed by Kaduce and Metzger (2017) to teach S- T words and then I will briefly discuss some of the tools that may be used by teachers in the EFL classroom. Some conclusions will follow.

## **2. The importance of teaching and learning S-T words in the EFL classroom**

EFL teaching mostly focuses on the formal register of the language. Even if students learn informal ways of speaking or writing, it is very unusual that they learn S-T words. However, there are many reasons why students may want to use S-T words and therefore, many reasons why it may be important to teach them in the EFL classroom.

There will be occasions when students need to express their feelings and want to use those words. People encounter situations where they get angry or frustrated by unexpected or unpleasant events. When this happens, they tend to swear to express their emotions (Holster, 2005). With the addition of S-T words in EFL classrooms, students would know how to express different emotions in a foreign country and culture, emotions that might be strong and very real. In particular, if a student understands the emotional force and conventions of swearing, using S-T words can be beneficial for them as they help them relieve negative emotions (Jay, 2009, as cited in Kaduce & Metzger, 2019).

Using S-T words might also be beneficial for the integration of the students in the community of the foreign language and, moreover, it helps them to socialise (Finn, 2017). Integration mainly takes place in an informal environment, outside the workplace or the classrooms, and people tend to swear more in these situations in contrast to the more formal ones (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). Swearing can be a way to connect with peers or to feel part of the group. For example, Horan (2013, as cited in Kaduce & Metzger, 2019) showed that college-aged students studying abroad in the U.S. usually consider swearing as a tool to connect with their American peers, so they are interested in learning how to use these words. In addition, according to Finn (2017), the relationship between two or more people improves when they break social taboos. For example, in a study conducted by Selnow (1985) (in Holster, 2005) it is shown that it is common for males to use taboo words to signal in-group membership. In Hay's study (1994) also cited in Holster (2005), it was discovered that swearing and jocular abuse are also used to show solidarity in mixed-gender group interaction in New Zealand.

Students need to be able to know when it is appropriate to use S-T words and how to use them. S-T words can have a strong emotional force and can be very offensive in certain contexts. Students should be aware of the offensiveness of the words they want to use. Finn (2017) provides a list of five themes for taboo words that could provoke negative emotions in the addressee:

1. Words related to the supernatural used to evoke fear connected with religion.
2. Words referring to body organs and effluvia in order to provoke disgust.
3. Reference to disease, death and physical or mental weakness
4. Sexual words which are used for revulsion and depravity
5. Terms to refer to disfavored people and groups moved by hatred and contempt.

Jay (2009) adds some more categories of offensive taboo words. He mentions ethnic-racial-gender slurs such as *nigger* and ancestral allusions like *son of a bitch*, among many others. Many of these words can be very offensive depending on the situation or who you are addressing. Some words, such as the word *nigger*, are known to be highly offensive by the native speakers, but students may not be aware of it and that is when teachers should step in.

Students need to be prepared for the real English-speaking world. Students are exposed to S-T words in movies, books and social media. And, while EFL students are able to repeat the S-T words they hear from an English native speaker, it is very challenging for them to grasp their real meaning and propriety with confidence (Register, 1996). So it is crucial for English language instructors to make an effort and introduce S-T words in their classrooms (Kaduce & Metzger, 2019), so that the students are aware of the consequences of using this kind of language and can avoid being in harmful situations.

Failing to equip our students with a better understanding of how SOTL<sup>1</sup> is used as a form of verbal abuse not only effectively limits their ability to understand potentially dangerous situations, but also robs them of their ability to verbally defend themselves against such attacks if they so wish, thus leaving them powerless in these precarious situations. (Wedlock, 2020)

Finally, given the important role of S-T words in language in general, the knowledge of this kind of language would make the learner even more proficient. Having a good level of the formal aspects of the English language is perfect for formal contexts such as the workplace and college, but it is not useful in all the situations a student can encounter. When it comes to informal situations, a formal register is not the most appropriate way to communicate. Knowing S-T words would make the students proficient in the informal register of the language.

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<sup>1</sup> Swearing, offensive and taboo language.

### **3. Teaching S-T words: EFL Teachers' attitudes**

As it has been stated above, there are many reasons why it is important for EFL students to know S-T words. But this does not mean that the EFL instructors teach students this language in the classroom. In fact, the use of S-T words is not a very common topic in most education systems. S-T words could be offensive, so they are hardly ever mentioned in textbooks or classrooms (Dewaele, 2004). However, this does not prevent students from hearing them in songs, movies, books and social media or needing to use them in certain contexts.

When a S-T word is mentioned in the ESL classroom, the most common attitude among the teachers is avoidance (Kaduce & Metzger, 2019). Some teachers do not know how to address this subject in their classes. Others would feel embarrassed doing it (Register, 1996). It is also assumed that S-T words are not part of the class syllabus because of their offensive character, but this is not the only reason. In a study conducted by Hoslter (2005) with 80 ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) teachers from Auckland, New Zealand, he concluded that the majority of the participants (67%) used S-T words in English sometimes, and when asked about the reason why they used these words in their everyday life, the most frequently repeated reason was that they expressed annoyance or frustration. The second most frequent reason was that they used S-T words to express a jocular insult.

But, while the majority of the teachers used S-T words in their lives, the results showed that the majority (71%) of the teachers did not teach them in their classrooms. The gender of the participants did not have a significant effect on the results, but the age did. According to the responses gathered, 14 out of the 40 teachers over 45 years old taught S-T words, while only 9 out of the 40 teachers between 25 and 35 years old did. This finding was rather contradictory since younger teachers used these words more frequently in their private lives than the older participants. It may also be surprising because it is generally assumed that younger generations use this kind of informal language more than older generations. However, this result may have been connected to their working experience since according to Finn (2017), some teachers had been fired because they incorporated swearing in their classrooms.

In addition to not teaching S-T words, Holster (2005) showed that most of the teachers did not feel comfortable teaching S-T words for several reasons. Some teachers thought



that, as they are part of modern English, students will be exposed to those words anyways, which means that it is not necessary for the teachers to teach S-T words to the students. They compared students to children and stated that, like the latter, students will pick up language without formal instruction. Some of the teachers did not feel comfortable teaching the literal meanings of those words, and one of the teachers also believed that students would find it a joke if he used bad language as this participant rarely used it in real life conversations. Finally, several teachers believed that S-T words should be completely eliminated from L2 classrooms, as they have no place in the students' vocabulary as illustrated in one of the teacher's quote:

“Teaching swear words is not the function of the language teacher. It has no place in the classroom environment. But what use are these words to language learners? Why clutter the vocabulary with profanities when learning decent language is hard enough?” (Holster, 2005, p132)

So, whether S-T words should be taught or not in L2 classes is a very controversial issue because some people question the appropriateness of teaching language with such potential offensiveness, and others still have doubts whether learning S-T words actually benefits L2 learners (Gale & Fernandez,2016). In any case, regardless of their attitudes towards teaching S-T words, teachers cannot really decide whether to teach them or not since most of the times they are not responsible for their course programmes.

#### **4. The emotional force of S-T words in the L1 and the L2**

S-T words have been and will always be part of a language. They are accessible to anyone, as they are present in songs, movies, TV series or the social media. However, students may use and react to S-T words in the L1 and the L2 differently. In this line, Caldwell-Harris (2015, p214) quotes the following phrase by Nelson Mandela: “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart”. This quote captures the different emotional effects that a language has on its native speakers and on its non-native language users.

Dewaele (2004) analysed whether multilingual speakers perceived the emotional force of S- T words uttered in several languages in a similar way. In his study, 1,039 multilinguals were gathered, 303 of whom were English speakers and 123 Spanish. Among the

participants, there were 144 bilinguals, 269 trilinguals, 289 quadrilinguals and 337 pentalinguals. The participants completed an online questionnaire with 34 questions on their age, gender, ethnic group, the number of languages known, the chronological order of language acquisition and their perception of the emotional weight of S-T words, as well as the language choice when using them. Dewaele proposed five hypotheses:

1. The emotional force of S-T words would be the highest in the speakers' L1 while it would be lower in languages learned after the first one.
2. The speaker's age, gender and education level could be linked to the perceived emotional force of S-T words.
3. If the L1 is no longer the speaker's dominant language, the emotional force of S-T words in that language would be weaker.
4. A weaker emotional force can be perceived if the participant learned their language(s) in an instructed environment.
5. "Participants who started learning a language at a younger age, or are more proficient in the language, or use the language more frequently might have higher scores in perception of emotional force of S-T words." (Dewaele, 2004, p. 212)

The results of this study fully support the first, third and fourth hypotheses. Regarding hypothesis 2, female participants had higher scores in the perception of the emotional weight. That is, gender had an effect on the perception, but the age and the education level did not. The fifth hypothesis was also partially supported, as it was only true when the learned language was the L2. In other words, Dewaele (2004) found that some participants perceived that S-T words in their L1 were too strong, so they preferred to use them in the 'other' language because they had a weaker emotional force for them.

Bond and Lai (1986) and Javier and Marcos (1989) (cited in Dewaele, 2004, p. 207) also showed that "bilinguals may codeswitch to their second language to distance themselves from what they say". In addition, Altarriba and Santiago-Rivera (1994) noted that clients in psychotherapy expressed their emotions more spontaneously when speaking in their native language, but they tended to switch languages when they wanted to distance themselves from painful memories or experiences. However, when the "other" languages were not learned in an instructed setting, they also had a similar effect as the L1 (Dewaele, 2004). This effect was also noted by Caldwell-Harris (2015), who showed that speakers

were prone to use emotional language in those languages learned naturally by social interaction.

Finally, Dewaele (2004) found out that the use of the colloquial register such as when taboo words are used is linked to the amount of contact with native speakers and the self-confidence that the speaker has when talking in their second, third or fourth language. In fact, his study showed that speakers who used the TL (target language) in a variety of contexts had developed the confidence to use S-T words in the appropriate situations (Dewaele, 2004; Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). This means that the emotional force of the words used by multilinguals is mainly determined by the individual's linguistic history, that is, when and how the language was learned and the frequency in which this language is used.

With this background in mind, in the next section of this paper I will present a study I conducted to investigate the students' attitudes towards S-T words in the EFL and in their L1s.

## **5. An empirical study of students' attitudes towards S-T words in the EFL classroom and in their L1**

When making decisions that affect the course syllabus, the students' point of view is not usually taken into account. But when dealing with such a controversial topic as learning and teaching S-T words (Gale & Fernandez, 2016), it is very important to hear their opinion. This is the reason why I decided to conduct a study among EFL students at a high school in the Basque Autonomous Country.

### **5.1 Aims of the study**

The goal of this study was to gather the students' opinions about S-T words in English and learning S-T words in the EFL classroom. In order to get a better grasp of the issue, I asked them about their attitudes towards these words in their L1s so that I could compare the results in all the languages they spoke. The research questions I addressed are the following:

1. What are the EFL students' attitudes towards S-T words in Basque?

2. What are the EFL students' attitudes towards S-T words in Spanish?
3. What are the EFL students' attitudes towards S-T words in English and in the EFL classroom?

I considered the variables of gender (female/male), the age of the participants and their level of proficiency in English. I also considered factors such as where they learned the S-T words, how frequently they used them, who they used them with, and how they felt when they used them.

## 5.2 Participants

The participants of this study were 320 high school students from Laskorain Ikastola. This school is located in the town of Tolosa, in Gipuzkoa, Spain. In this type of school, the academic language is Basque, which means that all the subjects are taught in this language except for the subjects of Spanish, English and French. The age of the participants ranged from 14 to 18 years old. As we can see in Table 1 the majority of the students were 16-years old with 37.8% of the students, followed by the 15-year-olds, with 23.4% of the students.

14-years old	15-years old	16-years old	17-years old	18-years old
27 (8.8%)	75 (23.4%)	121 (37.8%)	73 (22.8%)	23 (7.2%)

**Table 1.** Age of the participants

There were slightly more female participants (51.2%) than male participants (47.2%). Three students (0.9%) were non-binary and two (0.6%) participants preferred not to say their gender. As there are very few participants that are non-binary or preferred not to say their gender, the results of the study regarding gender will focus on female and male participants.

The first language of 82.2% of the students (263 students) was Basque, whereas Spanish was the first language of only 1.6% of the participants (5 students). 49 (15.3%) students stated that both Basque and Spanish were their first languages. One participant's first

language was only English, another student's first languages were Basque, Spanish and English, and one participant had Basque and English as first languages.

### 5.3 Methodology

Once I got permission from the school director to get in touch with the students, the data were gathered through an online questionnaire (see appendix 1). The first four questions of the questionnaire were designed to gather information about the students' age, gender, first language and which language they spoke more comfortably. The fact that Basque was most of the students' first language did not mean that they only used taboo words, including swear words, in this language, so I asked them about Spanish S-T words. They answered questions such as how frequently they used these words, the reason why they used them, with whom, where they had learned them, and how they felt when they used them. I asked these questions for all three languages, Basque, Spanish and English, In the case of English, I also asked them whether they knew any S-T words in English, how many S-T words they knew, their level of English competence, whether they believed it was important for them to learn these words at school and whether these words had the same emotional force in English as in the first language.

The questionnaire contained 33 closed-questions, but some of them had the possibility of adding an answer of their own. In this way, I was able to understand the students' opinions and attitudes better. By using this online questionnaire, I was able to gather a lot of information about students' attitudes, perceptions and use of languages in their everyday life.

### 5.4 Results

Since the participants were asked about the use of S-T words in three languages, Spanish, English and Basque, the results of the study will be presented in three parts, one for each language.

#### 5.4.1 Basque

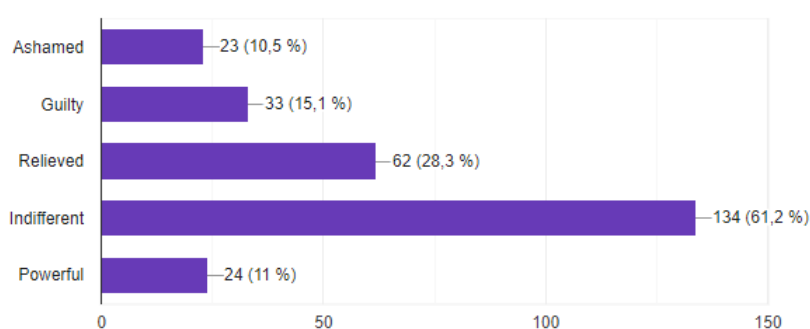
Regarding the use of S-T words in Basque, the L1 of the majority of the students, the online questionnaire revealed that 68.4% of the participants used taboo words in Basque,

whereas 31.6% did not. The age and gender of the participants did not provide a significant difference. 67.1% of female participants and 70.2% of male participants stated that they used S-T words. Most of the participants that did not use S-T words stated that they did not feel comfortable using them (44.6%) or that they did not know any taboo words in Basque (49.5%). 21.8% thought that it they felt it was inappropriate (participants could choose more than one answer).

Among the students that did use S-T words, 53% only used them occasionally, 31.5% often and 15.5% very frequently. The gender and age of the students did not prove to be important variables in this aspect. Students used S-T words in several environments so they chose as many answers as they needed. Almost all the students used taboo and swear words in Basque with friends (98.8%). Some of them also used them at school (33.3%) and with their families (28.8%).

When asked about why they used these words in Basque, most of the results showed that taboo and swear words were used to express anger (83.6%), followed by surprise (64.4%), happiness (52.1%) or to insult somebody (48.9%). Some students added that they used taboo words in order to normalize their use, that is to say, they believed that they were not different from a non-taboo word.

Figure 1 shows that the majority of the participants felt indifferent while using S-T words. We can also observe that many of the students also felt relieved after using this type of language. Some of the students chose more than one answer. Specifically, 61.2% of the answers contained “indifferent”, 28.3% “relieved”, 15.1% “guilty”, 11% “powerful” and 10.5% “ashamed”.



**Figure 1.** The way participants felt when using S-T words in Basque.

Students were also asked where they had learned the S-T words in Basque (they could choose various options). Most of the participants agreed that they mostly learned S-T words with friends (88.6%) and on the social media (68.5%). They also acquired them watching TV (52.1%), while listening to music (30.6%) and at home with their families (30.1%). Very few participants learned these words in classroom activities (11%), on the radio (9.6%) or in the news (8.2%), probably because they do not listen to the radio and it is rare to hear these words in the news.

As a summary of the main results, we can say that 68.4% of the students used S-T words in Basque, the majority of the students used them only occasionally across all age groups with no difference between genders. They used them while they were with friends to express anger mainly, and the use of these words did not have a strong emotional effect on them. They learned these words primarily through friends and while using the social media.

#### 5.4.2 Spanish

Although Basque is the first language for the majority of the students (82.2%), 93.8% of the participants, regardless of the gender, stated that they used S-T words in Spanish. When the age of the participants was taken into account, all the participants aged 14 and 18 responded that they used S-T words in Spanish. Among the rest of the participants, only a minority said that they did not use them. 10.7% of the 15-year-old participants stated that they did not use S-T words in Spanish. 9.1% of the 16-year-old participants and 1.4% of the 17-year-old participants did not use them either.

42.7% of the participants used S-T words in Spanish only occasionally, while 36.7% used them often. 20.7% used them very frequently. Age and gender were not important variables in this aspect.

The students used taboo words in Spanish in the same situations that they used them in Basque. That is, participants used them with friends in the majority of the cases (97.3%), followed by when they were at school (35.7%), with family (24%), and on social media (18.7%). The results also showed that most of the students used taboo words to express anger (82.3%), to express surprise (62.7%), happiness (47.7%) or to insult (48.3%). Some of the students added that they also used these words to tease or joke with friends.

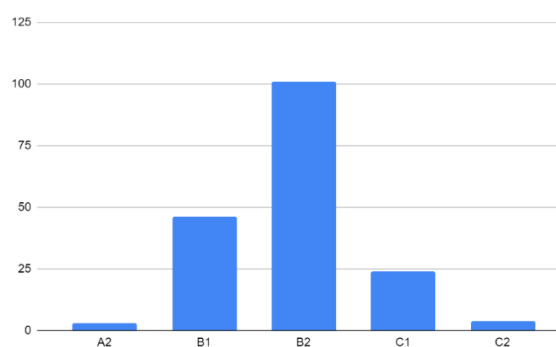
The responses regarding how they felt when using these types of words in Spanish and where they had learned them were very similar to the ones obtained for the taboo words in Basque, namely, they felt indifferent (60.7%) when they used them, and they learned them from friends (88%) and on the social media (69.7%).

To summarise the main findings, we have seen that 93.8% of the participants used S-T words in Spanish, despite not being the L1 of the majority. Most of the participants (42.7%) used them occasionally. They mostly used them with their friends to express anger and surprise. The results also showed that participants mainly felt indifferent when using S-T words in Spanish, and that most of them had learned them with friends.

#### 5.4.3 English

Participants were also questioned about their L2 or L3, English in most of the cases. 55.6% of the participants stated that they knew S-T words in English, but a very high percentage of the students (44.4%) did not know any taboo words in English. Most of them stated that they did not know any because they did not use informal English (59.9%) and that they had not learned them at school (45.1%). 43% of the participants were not interested in learning S-T words in English, while 27.5% felt that they did not have the need to know them (students could mark more than one option).

The level of English proficiency of the participants affected whether they knew S-T words or not. As we can see, the majority of the students who knew these words were at the B2 level, followed by B1 and in the third place C1, which is an interesting result because a higher level of English does not mean that they knew more S-T words.



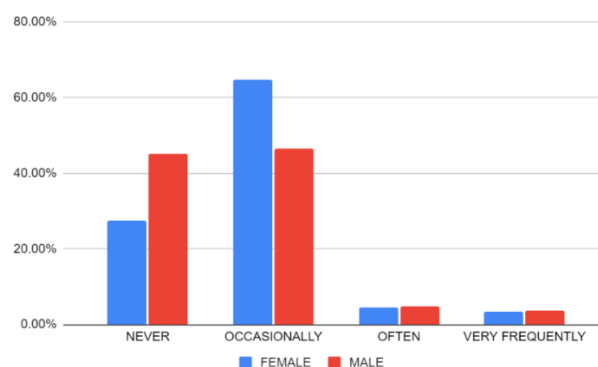
**Figure 2.** Percentage of the participants that know S-T words in English according to their level of English



The knowledge of taboo words in English was not affected by the gender of the participants very much. In fact, the results of male and female participants were the same. 55.5% of female students answered that they used S-T words, while 44.5% did not. In the case of male participants, 55.5% used S-T words and 44.5% did not. However, the age of the participants did play an important role. In fact, the majority of the younger students stated that they knew some of these words (71.4% of the 14-year-olds and 66.7% of the 15-year-olds). However, among the older the participants there were fewer who knew S-T words since only 43.5% of the 18-year-old participants admitted to knowing some of these words in English, which is a big difference when compared to the younger students.

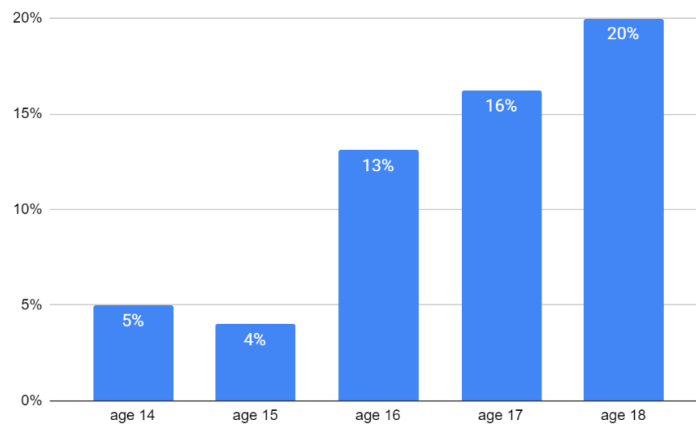
Among all the participants who knew taboo words in English, the majority stated that they used these words ‘occasionally’ (55.6%). Many students (35.4%) also said that they ‘never’ used these words in English because they did not feel comfortable using them. However, age was an important variable in the frequency of use because while most of the participants used taboo words ‘occasionally’, 50% of 14-year-old students ‘never’ used them, although they were familiar with them.

As we can observe in Figure 3, gender plays an important role in the frequency of taboo words they used. The majority of female participants (64.8%) stated that they used taboo words in English occasionally, while only 46.2% of males did. Moreover 45.2% of male students ‘never’ used them, while among females, only 27.5% never used taboo words in English. So, it seems that female students used S-T words more than the male students, although they used them ‘occasionally’ in general.



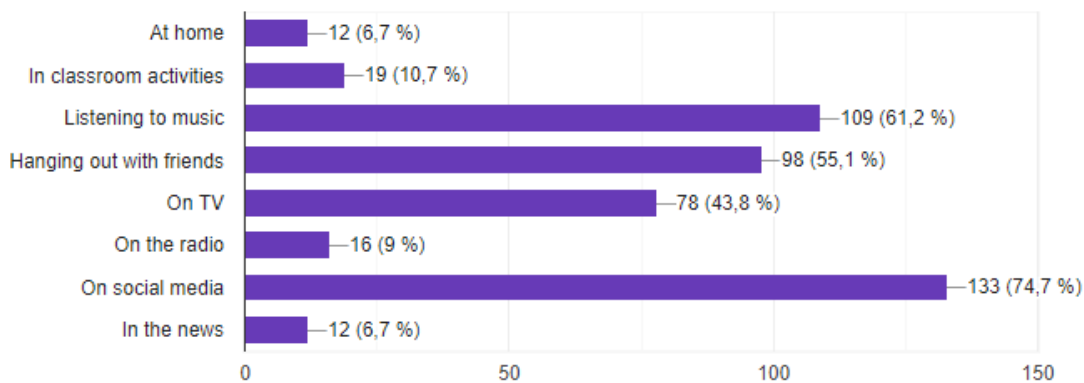
**Figure 3.** Frequency of male and female participants using taboo words in English.

46.1% of the participants knew between 0-5 taboo words in English and 35.4% between 6-10. 15.5% of the male students knew more than 15 S-T words, whereas only 4.4% of the female students knew more than 15. Hence, the male participants appeared to know more S-T words than the females. Moreover, as we can see in Figure 4, age was also an important factor in this matter. The older the participants were, the higher the number of taboo words they knew. So, while there were more younger students than older students who knew some S-T words, the latter knew more S-T words than the former.



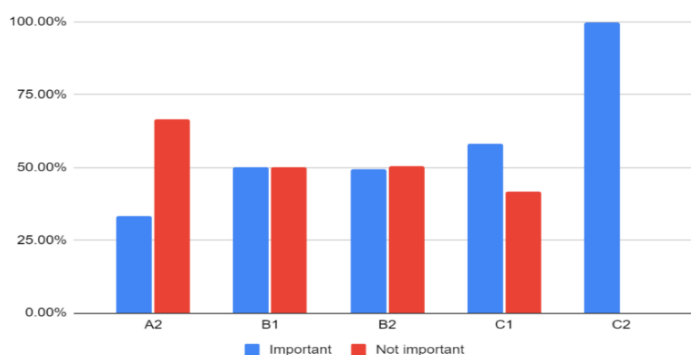
**Figure 4.** The number of participants that know more than 15 taboo words in English.

Most of the participants (80.3%) stated that they used S-T words in English with friends, and that they used them to express anger (61.8%) and surprise (45.5%). As Figure 5 shows, the students learned S-T words in English on the social media mainly (74.7%), followed by listening to songs (61.2%), hanging out with friends (55.1%) and watching TV (43.8%) (students could mark more than one option). Very few participants stated that they learned taboo words in classroom activities (10.7%).



**Figure 5.** The situations in which participants have learned S-T words in English.

The opinions on the issue of whether it is important to learn taboo words at school or not were divided: 52.2% of the participants agreed that it was important, while the rest thought otherwise. Gender was not an important factor in this matter, but age was since half of the participants aged 14, 15 and 16 thought it was important to learn S-T words at school, 64.9% of the 17-year-olds thought it was important, and 60% of the 18-year-olds also did. The participants' English level also played an important role in this aspect, as shown in Figure 6.



**Figure 6.** The importance of learning S-T words at school according to the participants' English level.

The students that were the most proficient in English stated that it was important to learn taboo words at school (C1 and C2). The students who had an intermediate B1/ B2 proficiency level were divided: the number of students who believed it was important and the number of students who believed it was not was very similar. The majority of the students whose level of proficiency was low (A2) claimed that it was not important

(66.7%), perhaps because it was not their main priority given their low level of proficiency in English.

According to the students, there were many reasons why it is important to learn taboo words at school and the students marked more than one option. For instance, they stated that they would like to understand non-academic or informal language (63.2%) and be aware of the contexts in which these words can be used (47.4%). Many participants also wanted to know taboo words to express their feelings (51.6%). By contrast, the participants who did not believe it is important to learn taboo words at school responded that they thought it was inappropriate (55.7%) and that they could learn those words outside the classroom (42%). 29.5% of these students claimed that it would encourage students to use them, and they did not think that it was appropriate.

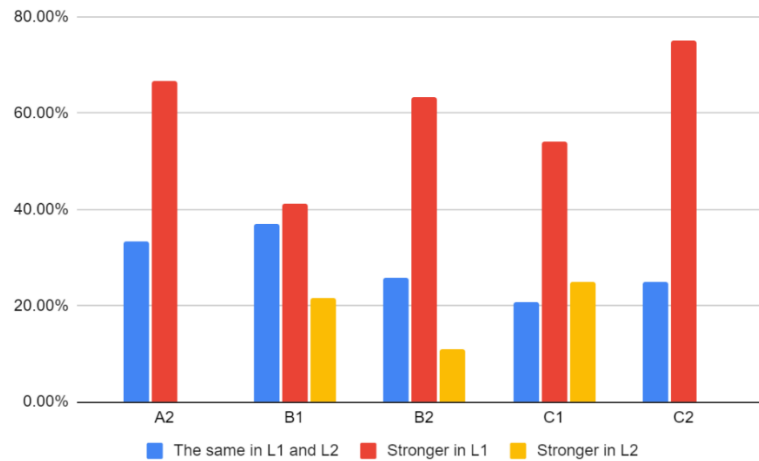
When asked about the emotional force of S-T words, 56.7% of the students claimed that they felt that the words in the L1 had a stronger emotional force than in the L2, in this case English (see Figure 7). However, some participants also thought that the emotional force of these words was the same when uttered in their L1 or the L2 (28.1%). The students' age had an interesting effect in this aspect since 40% of the 18-year-old participants, who were merely 7.2% of the total number of students, stated that English taboo words had stronger emotional force than the words in their L1. Nevertheless, this opinion was not very common among participants of a different age.



**Figure 7.** The emotional force of taboo and swear words in L1 and L2.

The participants' level of English was a determining factor in the students' appreciation of the emotional force of the taboo words in English. As we can observe in Figure 8, all the participants regardless of their level stated that the emotional force was stronger in

their L1. However, that is not very clear among the participants with a B1 proficiency level. 37% of the participants with B1 level stated that the taboo words had the same emotional force in their L1 and L2, but almost the same number of participants thought it was stronger in L1.



**Figure 8.** The emotional force of participants according to their English level.

To summarise the main results related to English S-T words, 55.6% of the participants knew at least one S-T word in English. The majority of them (55.6%) use them occasionally, and they usually used them with friends (80.3%). Most of them also stated that they felt indifferent while using S-T words in English and most of them learned these words on social media (74.7%). 52.2% of the students agreed that it was important to learn S-T words in English at school and the level of English had a big impact in this matter. The more proficient, the more important they thought it was to learn them. Most of the students (56.7%) also felt that the emotional force of S-T words was stronger in the L1 than in the L2.

Table 2 shows some of the main results regarding S-T words in Basque, Spanish and English.

	<b>Basque</b>		<b>Spanish</b>		<b>English</b>	
<b>Do you use swear words?</b>	Yes: 68.4%	Occasionally: 53% Often: 31.5% Frequently: 15.5%	Yes: 93.8%	Occasionally: 42.7% Often: 36.7% Frequently: 20.7%	Yes:	Never: 35.4% Occasionally: 55.6% Often: 4.5% Frequently: 4.5 %
	No: 31.6%	Why? -I don't feel comfortable: 44.6% -I don't know taboo words: 49.5% -I don't think it is appropriate: 21.8%	No: 6.8%	Why? -I don't feel comfortable: 45% -I don't know taboo words: 40% -I don't think it is appropriate: 35%	No:	Why? -I don't feel comfortable: 70.3% -I don't know taboo words: 10.8% -I don't think it is appropriate: 28.4%
<b>Where did you learn them?</b>	At home: 30.1% In classroom activities: 11% Listening to music: 30.6% With friends: 88.6% On TV: 52.1% On social media: 68.5%		At home: 28.7% In classroom activities: 11% Listening to music: 36.3% With friends: 88% On TV: 46.7% On social media: 69.7%		At home: 6.7% In classroom activities: 10.7% Listening to music: 61.2% With friends: 55.1% On TV: 43.8% On social media: 77.4%	

**Table 2.** A summary of some of the main results of the study

5.5 Conclusions

In this study we have seen that while all the participants of this study were bilingual speakers of Spanish and Basque, and Basque was the majority of the students' L1, the participants used more S-T words in Spanish than in Basque. This could be accounted for the fact that they had more contact with the informal register of Spanish than with the informal register of Basque. However, the main reason why they used these words in Spanish or Basque is the same, namely, they used them to express anger. These results coincide with the ones in the study by Chen (1999, as cited in Holster, 2005, p32).

The main difference that we can observe between S-T words in Basque, Spanish and English is the environment in which participants acquired these words. While the students learned the Basque and Spanish S-T words mostly with friends and on social media, most participants learned English S-T words through social media or listening to music. Few participants stated that they had learned taboo words in classroom activities. Moreover, many students were interested in knowing more taboo words, so that they could express their emotions better (Horan, 2013).

However, not all the students thought that they should learn taboo words in English at school. Although the majority stated that they thought it was important to learn them in the classroom, there were many students who did not agree. Many students thought that they found it inappropriate to be taught those words in a classroom, while others

considered that it would be beneficial for them. Most of the participants with higher English level believed that S-T words should be part of the classroom curriculum.

The study has also revealed that according to the students, the emotional force of taboo words is stronger in their L1 (Basque or Spanish) than in their L2 (English). These results agree with Dewaele's (2004) and other researchers' results on multilingualism which have shown that the emotional force of S-T words is stronger in the L1. However, my study has revealed that this aspect depends on the students' proficiency in English. In my study, I showed that many students who are less proficient did not see a difference in the emotional force of S-T words in their L1 and L2. This result is not surprising since the more proficiency a person in an L2 is, the closer the person feels to the language and the greater their understanding of the consequences of using one word or another is.

The study has also showed that the higher the level of proficiency, the more interested they are in learning how to express themselves in all the registers of the English language. The lack of knowledge about S-T words in English from the perspective of less proficient students might be a hint that this informal register should be addressed in the classroom. Nevertheless, while S-T words are not usually taught in the classroom, most of the students are still going to learn them because as revealed in my study, the older students knew more S-T words than the younger students.

In the last section of this paper, I will present a proposal to teach S-T words in EFL/ESL and will discuss some of the tools that may be brought to the classroom.

## **6. Introducing S-T words in EFL/ESL: a pedagogical proposal and some tools**

It is not very common to find the topic of S-T words as part of the course curriculum in educational systems. As a result, it is hardly ever mentioned in textbooks and there are not many materials available for the teachers. This means that if a teacher decides to deal with this topic in the classroom, they will find it rather difficult to include it in the classroom curriculum. In order to help EFL teachers, in this section, I will first summarise a pilot unit proposed by Kaduce and Metzger (2019) to teach S-T words in the classroom, and then I will briefly discuss some of the tools that they may use.

Kaduce and Metzger (2019) created a pilot unit in order to introduce swearing into Intensive English Program (EIP) classrooms because students frequently did not know

when and how to use swear words. However, they did not want to give students a list of words for them to memorize. Instead, their aim was to create a comfortable environment for students to have a curious attitude towards swearing. The pilot unit consisted of four parts that could be completed in a few class periods.

The aim of the first part was to make students curious about swearing in American culture. They discussed about their knowledge on the culture of swearing in groups, and then the students gave their opinion to the rest of the class. In the last part of the lesson, the instructor gave students a list of guidelines and advice.

The second part focused on the introduction of swearing in English. Students first watched the short comedy sketch *Ass Is the Most Complicated Word in the English Language* where there is an English L2 learner. Students had to take notes and pay attention to the different ways the comedian used the word 'ass'. The aim of this exercise was to demonstrate that swearing can be used in many different ways.

In the third part of the unit, students filled out a handout that consisted of three columns: swear or taboo word, definition and sentence. They had to show their knowledge about swear/taboo words in English by listing all the swear words they knew and what they knew about them. Later, the instructor addressed the most common S-T words that students had listed. As a final activity of that lesson, students filled out another chart to make them think about where they could use each of the words.

Finally, the fourth part of the unit consisted of two main components. First, students talked about situations where they thought it is appropriate to swear. Next, students, on their own, created sentences and came up with scenes in which it is appropriate to use swear words. This lesson was carried out by different role-play activities.

As for the tools that a teacher can use, Finn (2017) mentions two textbooks by Johnson on S-T words for ESL teachers: *English as a Second F\*cking Language* (1996) and *Watch Your F\*cking Language* (2004). Teachers may also use several sites on the internet with exercises for students. For example, in [www.breakingnewsenglish.com](http://www.breakingnewsenglish.com) there is a lesson on swearing which includes readings, listening activities and exercise sheets. Websites may make it easier for students to practice their taboo or swear words in the EFL classroom. Two of these websites are *Mentimeter* and *AnswerGarden*, which may be used to get classroom feedback and real-time voting results on any topic free of charge. For example, students can be told to write words that they already know or that they have



heard before. When students write down their words, these web pages create a growing word cloud. The words or expressions that are repeated the most appear in big letters, whereas the other words are smaller. With these tools, the teacher has instant access to the words that students already know. Then, the instructor can provide the words' literal meanings and a brief explanation of the context where it would be appropriate or not to use them.

Watching movies and listening to music can also be good sources for S-T words for the EFL students, and, since they are used in a context, the students can see how these words are actually used. For example, students might be proposed to watch a movie at home and to write down the S-T words that they hear in it. They might not recognise all the words that the movie contains, but the intonation and body language of the characters might help them identify the taboo or swear words. The same thing could be done with songs in class. Since students normally like watching movies and listening to music, the students are going to pay attention and enjoy these activities.

## **7. Conclusions**

S-T words are a very important part of language. They are not only used to offend or embarrass the addressee, but they also allow speakers to express their emotions, to show that they feel angry or frustrated. They are also very useful for cultural integration and to boost the sense of community.

However, S-T words are not usually considered in the curricula in the EFL classrooms because they are not seen with good eyes in the educational systems. Furthermore, S-T words are not taught because teachers' attitudes towards them is frequently not very positive or they do not feel comfortable discussing them in the classroom, among other reasons. But as we have seen, teaching this language is vital for EFL students, because students are frequently not aware of the emotional force of S-T words and if they do not use them appropriately, it could lead to misunderstandings with other speakers.

S-T words should be normalised in the ESL classrooms. Students are going to hear them in songs, movies, on the social media or from native speakers, but they may not learn them well by themselves, which is why they still need the teacher's help to learn them. Even though students are also exposed to grammar and vocabulary outside the classroom,

they still need to be taught the rules and the vocabulary in the classroom. The same thing goes for S-T words, so the best way to help them is to familiarise students with S-T words in the classrooms.

However, the integration of S-T words in the EFL classrooms is complicated. In my study, although the majority of the students thought that it was important to learn English S-T words in the classroom, almost half of the participants thought the opposite. This means that there are students who are willing to learn these words so that they are able to express their feelings better and have more knowledge on the informal register of English. However, there are other students who find it inappropriate and may not feel comfortable learning them in the classroom. Another factor that makes the integration of S-T words in the high-school curriculum difficult is the fact that the students are under age, and therefore it might be considered inappropriate to teach them this register of the English language. These words may also be offensive for some people, which means that teachers would need the parents' and the school's permission. In addition, some teachers may also feel uncomfortable teaching these words in the classroom. I propose that the process of integration could start very slowly by addressing at least some S-T words rather than ignoring them completely, and it should be optional (Finn, 2017). I believe that overall, the benefits are more than the drawbacks: the students will benefit from learning S-T words in the classroom because, by learning a more informal register of English, they would be provided with a more realistic approach to everyday English.

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## Appendix 1: Online questionnaire

1. Age:
  - 14
  - 15
  - 16
  - 17
  - 18
2. Gender:
  - Female
  - Male
  - Non-binary
  - Prefer not to say
3. What is your first language?
  - Basque
  - Spanish
  - Basque and Spanish
  - Other
4. What language do you speak more comfortably?
  - Basque
  - Spanish
  - English

### Please answer the following questions on *taboo words*.

Keep in mind that *taboo words* are words that are usually avoided because they can be offensive or embarrassing, such as words related to sex, religion, body parts and swear words.

#### Basque:

5. Do you use taboo words in Basque?
  - Yes
  - No
6. If you said 'no', why not?
  - I don't feel comfortable
  - I don't know taboo words in Basque
  - I don't think it is appropriate
  - Other
7. If you said 'yes', how frequently do you use taboo language in Basque?
  - Occasionally
  - Often
  - Very frequently
8. In what situations do you use these words? (Choose as many as you need)
  - With family
  - With friends
  - At school
  - On social media
  - Other...

9. What do you use these taboo words for? (Choose as many as you need)
- To express anger
  - To express surprise
  - To express happiness
  - To insult somebody
  - Other
10. How do you feel when you use these words? (Choose as many as you need)
- Ashamed
  - Guilty
  - Relieved
  - Indifferent
  - Powerful
  - Other
11. Where have you learned these words? (Choose as many as you need)
- At home
  - At classroom activities
  - Listening to music
  - Hanging out with friends
  - On TV
  - On the radio
  - On social media
  - In the news
  - Other

**Spanish:**

12. Do you use taboo words in Spanish?
- Yes
  - No
13. If you said 'no', why not?
- I don't feel comfortable
  - I don't know taboo words in Spanish
  - I don't think it is appropriate
  - Other
14. If you said 'yes', how frequently do you use taboo language in Spanish?
- Occasionally
  - Often
  - Very frequently
15. In what situations do you use these words? (Choose as many as you need)
- With family
  - With friends
  - At school
  - On social media
  - Other
16. What do you use these taboo words for? (Choose as many as you need)
- To express anger
  - To express surprise
  - To express happiness

- To insult somebody
  - Other
17. How do you feel when you use these words? (Choose as many as you need)
- Ashamed
  - Guilty
  - Relieved
  - Indifferent
  - Powerful
  - Other
18. Where have you learned these words? (Choose as many as you need)
- At home
  - At classroom activities
  - Listening to music
  - Hanging out with friends
  - On TV
  - On the radio
  - On social media
  - In the news
  - Other

**English:**

19. Do you know taboo words in English?
- Yes
  - No
20. If you said 'no', what is your English level?
- A2
  - B1
  - B2
  - C1
  - C2
21. Why don't you know any taboo words in English? (Choose as many as you need)
- I haven't learned them at school
  - I don't use informal English
  - I am not interested in learning taboo words in English
  - I don't need to know taboo words
  - Other
22. If you said 'yes', what is your English level?
- A2
  - B1
  - B2
  - C1
  - C2
23. How frequently do you use taboo language in English?
- Never
  - Occasionally
  - Often

- Very frequently
24. If you NEVER use taboo words, why not? (choose as many as you need)
- I don't feel comfortable
  - I don't know many taboo words in English
  - I don't think it is appropriate
  - Other
25. How many taboo words do you know in English?
- 0-5
  - 6-10
  - 11-15
  - More than 15
26. In what situations do you use these words? (choose as many as you need)
- With family
  - With friends
  - At school
  - On social media
  - Other...
27. What do you use these taboo words for? (choose as many as you need)
- To express anger
  - To express surprise
  - To express happiness
  - To insult somebody
  - Other...
28. How do you feel when you use these words? (choose as many as you need)
- Ashamed
  - Guilty
  - Relieved
  - Indifferent
  - Powerful
  - Other
29. Where did you learned these words? (choose as many as you need)
- At home
  - In classroom activities
  - Listening to music
  - Hanging out with friends
  - On TV
  - On the radio
  - On social media
  - In the news
  - Other
30. Do you think it is important to learn taboo words at school?
- Yes
  - No
31. If your answer was "yes", why? (choose as many as you need)
- I would like to know how to express all my feelings.
  - I think it might help me socialise with native speakers.
  - I would like to know the context in which I can use them.



- I would like to know how offensive they can be.
- I would like to understand non-academic informal language.
- Other

32. If your answer was “no”, why not?

- I think it is inappropriate.
- It would encourage students to use them.
- I can learn them outside the classroom (talking to native speakers, through social media, news, listening to music...)
- Other

33. Is the emotional force of taboo words the same for you in English and in your first language? That is, do taboo words have the same effect on you when you say them in English or in your first language?

- Yes, they have the same emotional force.
- No, the effect of these words is stronger in my first language.
- No, the effect of these words is stronger in English.