Milo Watering Love

How bad can it be?

A look at attitudes to swear words amongst adult learners of English as a foreign language

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Abstract:

This thesis explores what English swear words have entered the vocabularies of students attending *Voksenopplærignen* in Norway. This group is made of highly varied cultural backgrounds, language communities, and past experiences with English. English proficiency is diverse, and the aim is to uncover what attitudes arise to English swear words when English is acquired later in life. The data has been gathered through a digital questionnaire, and in addition to reported attitudes, the survey seeks to establish how frequently the participants use swear words, as well as their motivation for using English swear words. 77 students from 3 adult educational institutes have been surveyed, and in this thesis their attitudes have been descried, and compared to previous research from both native and non-native English-speaking communities.

Sammendrag

Denne tesen har utforsket hvilke engelske banneord som har blitt tilegnet av elever på Voksenopplæringen, samt hvilke holdninger de har til disse ordene. Elevgruppen består av mange kulturelle bakgrunner, og tidligere språk erfaringer. Kompetanse nivået til elvene er vidt forskjellig når det kommer til engelsk ferdigheter, og målet er å utforske hvilke holdninger som oppstår når engelsk blir tilegnet som voksen. I tillegg forsøker tesen å etablere hvor ofte elevene bruker engelske banneord, samt hvilke motivasjoner banningen deres kan ha. 77 elever fra 3 institutter som tilbyr Voksenopplæringen har tatt del i en digital spørreundersøkelse. Holdningen de har til engelske banneord har blitt beskrevet og sammenlignet med tidligere studies fra både land med engelsk som morsmål og land som ikke har engelsk som morsmål.

Acknowledgment

First and foremost, I would like to extend a massive thanks to Susanne Mohr for excellent feedback throughout this writing process. Your very detailed comments did not hold back, and I am grateful for your honesty, your precision, and your everlasting patience! Secondly, thank you to my fellow students for keeping me (partially) sane throughout these past few months, I have loved sharing your anxiety, and I now look forward to sharing the joy of completing our degrees. The Norwegian educational system will be lucky to have such an excellent group of newly graduated teachers joining their ranks! I would also like to thank the English teachers that have made this thesis possible, and by extension, all the students at *Voksenopplæringen* that had to sit through my awkward explanation of why they should not google the word *pussy*. It has been a pleasure working with you, and I wish you all the best in your language learning journeys. Lastly, I would like to thank two notable ladies that have given me never-ending support and reminded me to chop wood and carry water, my mother Elsbeth Watering, and my darling Alina Meinich.

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1. Introduction:

Language has many functions, amongst them conveying and recognizing emotions. People live highly emotional lives, and it is therefore not surprising that our expressive capacity evolved to include words that can carry these emotions swiftly and effectively. Swear words are among our greatest linguistic resource for this purpose, as they can modify, encapsulate, and amplify emotional sentiment with little effort. Swear words often carry a negative connotation, exemplified by the seemingly universal tendency to limit children's exposure to swearing, and the accompanying audible *beeps* and written asterisks when swearing occurs in media. However, an emerging academic re-evaluation of the phenomenon over the past decade has given contextual factors more importance, as well as highlighting the variety of situations where swearing can be used appropriately. This work has decreased the academically associated negative character of swear words, and with it, increased the acceptability of placing swearing as the focus of investigation. A related trend is the mounting number of people learning English as a foreign language, and many are well into adulthood before this process takes place explicitly. The participant group this paper has explored are students attending *Grunnskole for voksne* (Primary Education for Adults), one of the programs available through *Voksenopplæringen* (Adult Education Program) in Norway. Students attending this program are on course to completing the necessary Primary Education needed in Norway to move on to Upper Secondary Education (*Videregående),* and for some, this means having English as a school subject. Although the students come from various cultural backgrounds and language communities, few have had any formal education in English. This means that the participants are actively engaged in English acquisition as an LX in adulthood, in a country that does not speak English natively.

This thesis takes a quantitative approach and has surveyed the participant group using a digital questionnaire. As the participants in question are largely unexplored, this paper takes a broad approach and does not attempt to answer a preconceived hypothesis. Instead, the paper has two primary goals. Firstly, to describe the attitudes presented in the collected survey data and discuss the possible reasons these trends have been observed. And secondly, to compare the data to similar research from other language communities. The data used in this paper was gathered through a digital questionnaire made accessible to participants while they were in their respective classrooms. For any given class that participated, I was present to explain my intention and go through the questionnaire in person. The questionnaire asked participants to rate a selection of English swear words, with an additional assortment of questions regarding

swearing frequency and reasons for using swear words. The questions were tailored to the varied competence levels amongst the students and were designed to outline an overview of the attitudes this participant group have to English swear words. The inquiry fits into the widening array of sociolinguistic research with an emphasis on non-native perspectives and swearing.

The following thesis is divided into five main chapters, with chapter 2 taking a look at the theoretical framework surrounding sociolinguistic inquiries into swearing. This chapter deals with defining a swear word, the reasons behind swearing, and discusses a selection of previous research into the topic. chapter 3 is concentrated on the method used and the choices made surrounding the construction of the survey. In addition, participants recruitment will be reviewed, as well as the limitations that presented themselves throughout the process. Chapter 4 aims to describe the most notable trends observed in the collected data. Here, tables and figures display the various self-reported attitudes the participants have to the perceived offensiveness of English swear words, alongside the reported frequency rates and motivations for swearing. Having established the general overview of the trends observed in the data, chapter 5 discusses the findings in more depth. This chapter seeks to reveal why certain trends have been observed in the collected data, as well as the ways these trends agree with or differ from trends observed in attitude inquiries conducted in other language communities. The last chapter summarises the discussion and gives a tentative conclusion. In addition, this chapter contains suggestions for further research in light of this thesis.

2. Theory

In this chapter, the theoretical framework surrounding the phenomenon of swearing will be discussed. Section 2.1 defines swearing and describes how the phenomenon has been understood in this study. Section 2.2 investigates what motivations swearing can have, as well as how swear words can be perceived. In section 2.3, a selection of previous studies of offense and swearing will be discussed, one portion investigating English from a native-speaker perspective, and another from a non-native perspective.

2.1 Defining a swear word

When I asked the participants how they understood "swear words", the usual response was something along the lines of "they are bad words to say". This reflects the more traditional notion of swearing, unacceptable utterances that are perceived offensively. Swearing has been recorded in writing as far back as the ancient Egyptians, and historically a person found guilty of blasphemous swearing in Medieval Britain could be put to death. This shows that swearing

has been intimately tied to our vocabularies for millennia, that offense is subjective, and that attitudes change with time. Today, asterisks and audible beeps can often accompany swearing in Western media, revealing that an inherent badness persists in our perception. There seems to be a universal tendency to shield children to swearing, with guidelines governing what can be said on British television depending on the time of day (Millwood-Hargrave, 2000, p. 23). The participants also expressed that they were told not to swear when growing up, and that hearing an authoritative figure swear was a rare occurrence. This leads to a definition given by McEnery (2004, p. 1-2), he sees swearing as "any word or phrase which, when used in what one might call polite conversation, is likely to cause offence". The definition takes context into account and reveals that there is no universal representation of how offense is perceived. Politeness is intimately tied to perceptions of offense, as the speaker-listener relationship often impacts what words we use. McEnery's (2004) definition manages to account for context while also highlining the element of likelihood. In other words, there is no universal notion of what a listener will find offensive, offense is subjective, and by extension, so is our definition of a swear word.

This begs the question, why are certain words likely to cause offense? Ljung (2011) identifies four components that extend across cultures; 1) utterances contain taboo words, 2) meaning is often understood metaphorically, 3) swearing is formulaic language, and 4) swearing expresses emotion. The first component reveals that *taboo* words and *swear* words are closely related concepts, so much so that distinguishing the two is challenging. The same is true of *profanity* and *curse* words. Although they have different etymologies and describe slightly different phenomenon, I see little significance in differentiating them for this papers purpose. They share the property of transferring a perceived harm to the listener and are restricted at both institutional and individual levels (Jay, 2009, p. 153). Nevertheless, I believe *swear words* to be the most encompassing, and have used this term throughout this paper. Swear words are themed, and Ljung (2011) offers five major themes that endure across cultural boundaries. These are religiosity (*Hell, Jesus Christ)*, bodily functions (*piss, shit)*, sexual organs (*pussy, dick)*, sexual activity (*fuck, whore)*, and mother (*motherfucker*). I will add a sixth theme to encompass the swear words used in the survey, appearance/attribute (*retard, nigger).* Jay (2009, p. 153-154) posits that exactly what harm these themes are thought to cause is most often unclear, and moreover, taboos are not innate, they are learned. Children must not only acquire a perception of what concepts are deemed taboo, they must also learn when and where swear words are appropriate (discussed further in section 2.3 and 2.4). The

themes also point to Ljung's second component, the metaphorical nature of swear words. A swear word can have a whole host of meanings, altered by intonation, morphology, syntax, and context, to name a few. This is particularly evident in frequently used swear words, such as *shit* and *fuck* (McEnery & Xiao, 2004 and Kirk, 2013). In utterances like *he's the shit* and *how the fuck*[*?*]*,* the swear words do not seek to invoke the main dictionary definitions, excrement (Merriam-Webster, n.d., "shit") and copulation (Merriam-Webster, n.d., "fuck"). Rather, they are emblematic, projecting meaning that is bound by, and only understood through, pragmatic comprehension (discussed in Section 2.3.2).

This leads to Ljung's third component, swearing as formulaic language. *Shag* and *fuck* can be used synonymously, yet cannot be used interchangeably, evident in phrases like **shag off* and **what the shag*. Swearing is therefore formulaic as "[…] the meaning of the entire sequence cannot be understood from the words it contains, nor from its grammatical configuration" (Shakiba, 2014, p. 184). A higher degree of immersion in a given language increases grammatical and morphological possibilities, meaning a word like *fuck* can be used to express anything from pain and anger to pleasure and love (McEnery & Xiao, 2004, p. 236). *Fuck* is indeed the most commonly used swear word in the British National Corpus (BNC) McEnery & Xiao (2004) investigated, and according to Kirk (2013) the same is true of the US (alongside *shit*). The term *fuck* enjoys an almost absurd spectre of conventions, resulting in utterances like *the fuck*[?], *abso-fucking-lutely* and *I don't give a fuck*. In Norway, *fuck* first appeared in writing in 1948, yet it was seldom used until 1985 (Fjeld et al., 2019, p. 88). From then its usage has increased, giving rise to Norwegian morphological changes such as *fucka (fucked).* Although *fuck* is still considered a negative or offensive term, increased usage and variation decreases its perceived severity (Fjeld et al., 2019, p. 90). Ljung's forth component of swearing, expressing emotion, entwines what a swear word is with why we use them.

2.2 Motivations for swearing and perceived offense

Swearing can be done on purpose, or it can be involuntary. Exclamations when reacting to sudden physical or mental stimuli frequently take the shape of a swear word, and studies have shown that this act can alleviate pain (Stephens & Robertson, 2020). Of chief interest here, however, are the conscious motivations for swearing. Swear words can be used descriptively, as in *the dog took a shit on the pavement.* Emphatic swearing can blur the lines between description and metaphor, seen in *it tasted like shit* (Lafreniere et al., 2022, p. 910). A vague resemblance is evoked to further underline the point being made. Then again, *one hell of a guy* illustrates that there does not need to be any correlation between the description and what

is being emphasised. Empathic swearing modifies the severity of the situation, and so does cathartic swearing in which a swear word serves as an emotional release (Lafreniere et al., 2022, p. 910). This can take the form of an involuntary exclamation; however, cathartic swearing can blend with emphatic swearing, serving both to underline your point as well as relieving emotions, e.g., *fucking hell*. Idiomatic swearing draws on cultural idioms and would not necessarily make sense even if the descriptive element is known, as in *it was pissing down* or *up shit creek.* The final category covered here is one that will recur frequently throughout this paper, namely abusive swearing. Swear words are in this case directed towards an individual or a group with the explicit purpose of conveying something negative (Lafreniere et al., 2022, p. 910). Within abusive swearing there are further subcategories, directed abuse (*whore*), abuse of minorities (*gay, retard*), and racial abuse (*nigger, paki*) (Millwood-Hargrave, 2000, p. 8). This type of swearing has a more nefarious motivation, as there is an explicit wish to cause harm embedded in an utterance. In sum then, the impulse to swear can be motivated by a wide array of factors, united by their ability to increase the emotional potency of the speaker's state of mind (Lafreniere et al., 2022, p. 909).

Recent studies into relational work reveal that what is polite is not inherently fixed, and by extension, neither is impoliteness (Locher & Watts, 2005). Jay and Janschewitz (2008) take this notion further, applying it to the practice of swearing. Swearing is largely conversational, i.e., "not [used when] highly emotional, confrontational, rude, or aggressive" (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008, p. 268). This is not to say that swearing is not an emotional expression, rather they stress the fact that these do not need to be rooted in an amplified psychological distress. They argue that swearing can be impolite, polite, or neither; they can be used within any emotional state. Impoliteness depends on the relationship between speaker and listener, and therefore cannot be universally defined (Locker and Watts, 2005). The same is true of swearing, as we may use it for humour, to build relationships, to fit in, to stand out, establish dominance, alleviate tension, underline a point, and an array of additional motivations (Vingerhoets et al., 2013, p. 287). In broad terms, swearing stems from neurological, psychological, and sociocultural (NPS) processes. As a language user matures, so does the complexity of how these processes intertwine (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008, p. 270). The fact that swearing can be non-propositional (unintentional) as well as propositional (intentional) shows that emotions may rise involuntarily, and so may our reactions. Psychological factors include our identity building, how we wish to be viewed, and how we cope with emotional turbulence (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008, p. 271-272). Sociocultural factors are dependent on location,

gender, and occupation, and dictate attitudes like finding swearing more offensive when uttered by a principal than a student, or a politician opposed to a patron at the local pub.

2.3 Previous research

Sociolinguistic research can utilise a quantitative, qualitative, or mixed method depending on what insight is sought. To investigate a linguistic phenomenon like swearing, inquiries are made either from a native or a non-native perspective. Section 2.3.1 will present a selection of previous studies that have investigated English swear words from a native English speaker's perspective, limited to studies from the UK and US. Section 2.3.2 is focused on attitude studies of English swear words from the non-native English speaker's perspective. Emphasis is placed on how these studies relate to the data collected for this thesis, and the methodological approach will vary for the previous studies discussed in Section 2.3.1 and 2.3.2.

2.3.1 Native English speakers

McEnery & Xiao (2004, p. 236) sought to detail the distribution, variance, and frequency in "one of the most interesting and colourful words in the English language today", namely, *fuck*. In addition to uncovering the usage pattern of *fuck* in all of its variants (*fucked, fucking etc.)* and finding as many as nine main categories for how *fuck* is used, they also discuss the limitations of corpus linguistics. Although apt at description, it lacks in explanation, and although metadata (age, gender, social class) can contribute to the validity of the conclusions drawn, the researcher must rely on their own intuition (McEnery & Xiao, 2004, p. 266). The formal/informal divide is also made explicit by the fact that the variant *fucking* was 20 times more likely to occur in the spoken corpus, showing how informality is a key component of a reduced degree of offensiveness (McEnery & Xiao, 2004, p. 236).

Gauthier and Guille (2017) used a corpus study of *Twitter* (native English speakers) to assess Thelwall's (2008) hypothesis, that is, that women would increase their usage of strong swear words (high offence i.e., *fuck, cunt)* on social media, even surpassing men. There are conflicting reports as to how widespread swear words are in female vocabularies, Gauthier and Guille (2017) conclude that some words are mostly used by men (*fuck*, *cunt)* and some by women (*bitch)*, and that men generally use swear words in a larger number of contexts and variants. For the remaining swear words under investigation however, no statistically significant variance in usage was found (Gauthier & Guille, 2017, p. 157). Vingerhoets et al. (2013, p. 301) on the other hand, contradict this, saying that although swearing "was long considered a predominantly masculine activity, women now tend to swear as much, or even

more often, than men". In addition to a number of citations to back this claim, they also draw on broader trends in gender research, stating that the focus has long been on men and male swearing, with the cultural expectation that woman do not swear as much being largely based on contextless severity scale ratings, as well as limited access to the actual corpora of spoken register. That women do not swear is an expectation, not a reality, and women also tend to be more sensitive to context and often refrain from offensive language in public discourse (written or spoken) at risk of being marginalised or thought negatively of, particularly in mixed-gender settings (Vingerhoets et al., 2013).

Attitudes and feelings are harder to gauge when dealing solely with a corpus yet are made more available through surveys and interviews. The former can more quickly gather larger amounts of data with which to make a claim, and the latter sacrifices quantity for quality, giving participants a more in depth opportunity to formulate and express their thoughts and feelings. Millwood-Hargrave (2000) utilizes both, but for different inquiries. In exploring advertising and appropriateness of swear words on television for instance, she has used interviews to best uncover how the UK population views these topics. In charting the perceived severity of individual words and phrases, a survey was conducted. The survey revealed how *abuse* had shown the greatest mobility in the interim between 1997 and 2000, in contrast to the mostly unchanging ratings of swear words in other categories (Millwood-Hargrave, 2000, p. 15). Hagen (2013) and Gjesdal (2017) explored how age affects our attitudes to swear words by surveying various groups in York, UK. Hagen (2013, p. 76) reports that younger participants exhibited what he called a "liberal-minded" attitude to swear words, in which words like *nigger, paki,* and *spastic* were considered most offensive, while more traditional swears like *fuck* and *shit* were rated significantly higher in perceived offense by mature participants (age 60+). Gjesdal (2017) included a gender-based line of inquiry, challenging stereotypical notions such as swearing being a male dominated activity with data pointing to women as being frequent swearers. Gjesdal (2017, p. 43) found that younger participants (age 18-28) almost exclusively rated the included swear words as less offensive than the other age brackets, and that irrespective of age and gender, *motherfucker, cunt,* and *bitch* were viewed as most offensive. Beers Fägersten (2007) expands the inquiry to include a paramount component, context. Placing swear words in phrases and adding indications of the speaker-listener relationship drastically altered the perceived offence, with the inflected form of *fuck, fucking,* moving from a score of 1.4 to 6.6 depending on the context, sentence structure, and who was rating (e.g., Hispanic males, white females). The swear words

participants deemed most offensive without added context were *nigger* (8.5)*, cunt* (6.6)*,* and *motherfucker* (5.9). This research fits into a wider re-imagining of what role swearing plays in daily interactions, and what significance cultural and social experiences play in how we perceive offense.

2.3.2 Non-native English speakers

Fjeld et al., (2019) utilized multiple corpuses from six countries to uncover how English swear words (specifically *fuck*) have been adopted and adapted in the language repertoire of non-native English speakers. In the Nordic countries, *fuck* is a common swear words and has been adapted to the morphosyntactic composition of Icelandic, Danish, and Norwegian. In Hindi and Russian, *fuck* has less mobility, both in terms of expressive capability but also between social classes, with *fuck* being used less by the lower classes of India than the corresponding Hindi swears. In Amharic, *fuck* is hardly used, yet one similarity was found that corresponded to the above-mentioned languages, namely that younger people used *fuck* in a higher frequency than older language users (Fjeld et al., 2019, p. 108). They claim that there is a lack of knowledge from a multilingual perspective, and that the globalisation of cursing vocabularies is largely unexplored. Nicolau and Sukamto (2014) explored how students at an International School in Indonesia viewed English swear words, how often they used English swear words, and what situations would be best suited for English swear words as opposed to situations best suited for Indonesian swear words. They made a gender-based distinctions, looking at the differences in male and female attitudes and frequency patterns. What emerged was an impression that supports Harris's (2004) claim that L1 swearing is felt more strongly than swearing in LX. Responders said that for them, *fuck* "does not mean anything" and they "do not relate it to any bad connotation" (Nicolau and Sukamto, 2014, p. 73). This does not mean that offense cannot be felt in a language acquired later in life, as will be evident in Section 4.4.

Dewaele (2016, p. 112) takes this notion further, comparing native English-speakers and non-native English-speakers attitudes to 30 "emotion-laden words". Comparing these groups showed that having English as an LX caused participants to over-estimate the offensiveness of emotion-laden words. Lack of experience and experimentation leads to inaccurate estimates of offense, and as language learner risk losing face and causing offense, they tend not to experiment with swear words until they have reached a certain level of proficiency. Moreover, English as an LX was observed to cause more infrequent use of swear words than English as

an L1, even when the LX user reported to have a high degree of English competence. This is in part explained by LX user learning English through formal education, thereby attaching a "red flag" to these words as they are told that they may cause offense (Dewaele, 2016, p. 123). In an earlier study, Dewaele (2014, p. 8) discusses how our identities are in part tied to the language(s) we speak, and that a given language exists in its own emotional universe. To understand how, when, and where emotionally laden words can be appropriately used, time, exposure, and authentic interactions are necessary. Lundström (2019, p. 49) demonstrates that participants with Finnish/Swedish as L1 felt that the English words *fuck, shit,* and *goddamnit* were less severe than their Swedish counterparts. These were also the words that these participants were most likely to use, showing that exposure plays a key part in how we view offense (Lundström, 2019, p. 33).

3. Method

In this chapter, the methodological discissions will be explained and justified. Section 3.1 looks at the scope of this thesis, and the reason the participant group was selected for inquiry. In Section 3.2, the questionnaire and its components will be described, focusing especially on why the included questions and swear words were selected. Section 3.3 takes a brief look at how participants were recruited as well as how the questionnaire was conducted in practice. The last section in this chapter, Section 3.4, looks at the limitations of the methodological choices made, and discusses why, in light of these limitations, the choices remained.

3.1 Scope and participant selection

This paper investigates a particularly diverse participant group, namely students taking *Grunnskole for voksne* through the Norwegian educational program V*oksenopplæringne.* Here, adults from all over the world are actively engaged in the necessary Norwegian Primary Education needed to progress to Higher Education. All the participants in this current study were taking English as part of their education. This paper fits into an expanding area of inquiry that sees swearing from a multilingual perspective. Sociological inquiries into swearing have given greater attention to context, and how vital location, speaker-listener relationship, and cultural expectations are to how offense is perceived. Age and gender are sociodemographic variables often under investigation in previous studies, revealing many insights as to how these variables influence our perspectives (see section 2.2). However, these variables are often applied to groups that share a common native language, such as Nicolau and Sukamto's (2014) gender-based investigation of Indonesian native speakers' perception

of English swear words. In the previously mentioned study, the participants were also close in age, leaving room to investigate what perceptual differences emerged when viewing gender as a variable. The participants that are investigated in this current study are engaged in English acquisition later in life, yet beyond this commonality the group is highly diverse. Age has varied from 18-60, 24 separate L1s have been reported, as well as the inherent variation in stage of English acquisition. This diversity has made my inquiry more general, and although sociodemographic variables and language backgrounds will be considered occasionally, this paper's primary focus is to give a general overview of how English swear words are perceived by the group at large.

Seeing the group as a whole will give insights that I feel are of preliminary importance. Instead of investigating the language communities as single entities, I wish to uncover what attitudes arise when English is acquired later in life in a formal educational context. It is far beyond the scope of this paper to uncover how the various L1s have impacted the participants perception of English swear words, and similarly, age and gender are variables that will reveal more insight when investigated in light of this initial study. The current objective is to use data gathered from an in-person administered questionnaire to uncover what attitudes participants have to English swear words, as well as their frequency rates and self-reported reasons for using swear words. The diversity represented in classrooms throughout the Norwegian *Voksenopplæring* present a unique, multilingual, and multicultural composite of participants, and studying such a composite will help understand the complex ways in which pragmatics, offense, and politeness intersect through the use and acquisition of swear words. Individual language communities can be studied in their own right, yet what perceptual patterns arise from the collected experiences of multiple language communities as their members engage in English acquisition?

3.2 Survey and design

A quantitative approach is recommended when gaging attitudes for a larger population. Replicability, objectivity, and the verification-oriented nature of quantitative research are crucial elements, as an inherent part of attitude investigation is comparability (Nunan, 1992, p. 4). Broadly, the questionnaire used for this paper had three sections for participants to answer. The first was simply to establish the few sociodemographic variables that were sought, age and gender. Although these variables are not the primary focus of this paper, I found it relevant to have a certain understanding of the group's composition. Furthermore,

this section asked participants to disclose what they considered their first language, as well as what language they mostly spoke at home. The second part of the questionnaire sought to establish a little bit of background surrounding the participants self-reported frequency rates (in English and in L1, see section 4.2), and their motivations for swearing. I have followed Gideon's (2012, p. 94) seven steps in questionnaire construction, in which relevance and engagement is highlighted. Two main concerns have accompanied Gideon's guide, firstly the fact that my questionnaire is both distributed and answered within school hours. The second factor is language, as the participants are at various stages of acquisition, I have had to take care not to include advanced vocabulary and complicated formulations. The second part was therefore limited to four closed questions, each accompanied with simple explanations and a rather limited list of options, saving time and mental taxation. The questions were as follows: (1) "how often do you swear in English?" (2) "how often do you swear in your L1?" (3) "what language do you mostly speak at home?" (4) "in what situations do you swear?" (see Appendix 1 for full questionnaire transcript with the options available). Closed questions can add to engagement, as the participant does not need to formulate their own opinions, in addition to the ease at which variables can be controlled beforehand (Gideon, 2012, p. 98). To address Oldendick's (2012, p. 27) ethical obligation not to put participants through mental distress, I also chose not to inquire into matters they may find embarrassing or sensitive, such as their impression of people who swear and their experiences growing up.

The third and final section of the questionnaire is a Likert scale using descriptions for the participants to rate 17 English swear words (Gideon, 2012, p. 101). The choices available for the participants were "very bad – bad – ok – not swearing – don't know". The scale is borrowed from Millwood-Hargrave (2000, p. 10), yet I have changed the wording to better fit the target population. I felt *severity* may be an unfamiliar concept, and opted instead for *bad*, where the same sentiment is still present. I also dropped the adverbial *fairly*, and changed *mild* into *mild/ok*, as *ok* is a universally recognised marker. The last option, "don't know", was added to Millwood-Hargrave's scale, as my participants may not be familiar with all the included words. The number "17" may seem random and in some sense, it is, yet there are some choices laying the foundation for the choice of words. Firstly, I have omitted many words in Milwood-Hargrave (2000) and other UK focused studies, as words like *wanker, bugger,* and *twat* are highly culturally specific mostly to the UK. The list of words used for this study initially included the word *gay* yet had to be left out as the first surveyed class expressed that they were rating the word based on the description rather than perceived

offense (see Section 5.3, p. xx). The final list of swear words that were included in the survey were: *fuck, asshole, pussy, motherfucker, Jesus Christ, shit, retard, dick, whore, paki, piss, nigger, cunt, jew, hell, fuck you,* and *bitch.* The most decisive reason for the rather long list of words was that I wished to represent the various swear word categories with at least two words from each category under scrutiny (see section 2.1, p. xx). As the perspective this paper takes is broad I wished to get an overarching perspective of how the various categories intersect, and if there is a pattern in how offense is perceived depending on what category the word fits into.

3.3 Conducting the survey

3.3.1 Finding participants

Voksenopplæringen represented a unique composition of adults from all across the globe, with vastly different language backgrounds and cultural experiences. Many participants could be recruited simultaneously, while also giving room for me to be present as the questionnaire was being filled. The most useful approach tended to be slight variations of the same pattern, I would send an email to the administration and ask them to reach out to English teachers at the school in question. In some cases, I phoned the institute but was in every case asked to send an email anyway. The email would notify of the purpose of the study, and stated clearly that I would be available to be present myself to conduct the questionnaire. Of the 10 schools I reached out to, 3 expressed an interest in participating. In turn, the teachers I met through these schools recommended other English teachers that might be willing to participate. In sum, students from 8 separate classes took part in this study.

3.3.2 Survey in practice

Roughly 80% of gathered data was done while I was present in the classroom, the remaining 20% were collected by English teachers that had parallel classes that were unavailable while I was present. In these cases, the respective teacher would have been present while I conducted the survey beforehand, and I trust they gave the participants similar instructions. When I entered a new classroom, I would present myself and inform the students of my purpose. This would include stressing the fact that the answers are anonymous, their right to refuse to participate, as well as their right to retract answers at any time in the process. This possibility was guaranteed by the only obligatory section in the survey, where participants had to write an email address in order to submit their answers. Apart from this section, the remaining

questions were voluntary to answer, and participants could freely choose what they wished to divulge. The introduction was followed by a brief informal discussion with the class, focused on establishing the theme for the questionnaire, namely, swear words. The questionnaire was then digitally accessed through a link made available on the relevant digital learning platform. In the few cases where students did not have access to a laptop, the questionnaire was answered on mobile. Language posed an inherent problem, as students are at vastly different levels of English acquisition. To bypass this, the survey was translated from English to Norwegian verbally, with the survey projected on a screen at the front of the classroom. The survey was then done systematically, going through each question, and checking that the instructions were clear. When we reached the end of the survey and everyone had submitted their answers, I thanked them for their willingness to participate, and restressed the fact that retraction was possible if desired.

3.4 Limitations:

An initial concern going into this project was the uncertainty regarding the participants English competence. Participants are actively engaged in English acquisition as adults with largely dissimilar language backgrounds, making it beneficial to tailor the questions to the multitude of competence levels. The number of questions was limited, and formulations kept simple. This was also the reason I wished to be present as the data was collected, with the additional benefit of giving a hands-on feel to the project. I wanted to engage with the participants and found many of the informal conversations to be deciding for my understanding of how they viewed English swear words. This also revealed insight as to what role English media played in the participants lives (discussed in section 5.5, p. xx), and how participants viewed location and speaker-listener relationship in relation to perceived offence of swear words (discussed in section 5.3, p. xx). These became vital as one of the most glaring limitations of this study is its lack of attention to context. Beers Fägersten (2007) claims that the absence of context makes the study of swear words slightly redundant, as there is no way to distinguish what makes the word offensive. Leaving out a phrasal element, as well as who is speaking and receiving lessens the accuracy with which we can deem offense. The reason I have left context largely unexamined is in part due to concern for comprehension, especially as answers would be taken in writing. Had the scope of this study been larger, interviews could be beneficial to explore the role of context with less effort being placed on written English proficiency. However, as the purpose of this study was to establish a preliminary

overview of what English swear words participants have acquired, and how offense is perceived, the role of context has been deemphasised.

Language and offensiveness were two key factors going into this project. Learning a language later in life is no easy feat and I worried that perhaps many would not understand what I was asking and why. I did not wish to collect data if my purpose, intention, and anonymisation process was not fully understood, and I did not wish to dishearten these language learners by bombarding them with difficult terminology and open questions. This is also the reason I felt it necessary to travel to the locations in person, as I would be available to clear up confusion and elaborate verbally if anything was unclear. Offensiveness is inherent in swear words and is not easily bypassed. One measure was in person elaboration as to what they are about to answer, giving many opportunities to not participate if the topic was too sensitive. Another was leaving all questions "voluntary", ensuring no one would have to answer all sections to participate. Beyond this, perceived offensiveness is essentially what I am trying to establish, and I have therefore deemed informing about intention and purpose, as well as highlighting the continual right to withdraw as the only tangible measures to reduce offensiveness. The method itself is also limited insofar as the "outsider" perspective of quantitative research inherently omits the depth and "insider" perspective gained from a qualitative approach (Nunan, 1992, p. 4). In this case however, especially since the target population is largely unexplored, the generalising nature of quantitative research was deemed more appropriate for the scope of this paper. I felt a questionnaire was best suited to ensure that participants were given the opportunity to comment on the phenomenon irrespective of English competence levels. An interview would require that competence was at a certain level, and in doing so, excluding certain participants that I feel should be given the opportunity to contribute to this research.

Surveys are subject to sources of error, amongst others sampling errors (Bautista 2012, p. 37). These occur as the target population must in some way be randomised and yet taken to represent the population as a whole. In my case the distribution of schools is a sampling error in itself, as institutions offering *Voksenopplæring* can be found throughout Norway. However, I ultimately visited schools in only two Norwegian counties. This makes the conclusions drawn less encompassing for the population as a whole, further complicated by the fact that my participants are exclusively students taking English as a part of their primary education at the time of my enquiry. To avoid processing errors, I have done a pilot study to familiarise myself with how the software processes the data. Measurement errors are a further concern, as

comprehension of what is asked is crucial for the data to reflect the attitudes of the participants (Bautista, 2012, p. 48). To curtail this, being able to clarify in-person was beneficial to confirm that the participants were confident in what they were answering. Nevertheless, accuracy is also an inherent limitation in this study, discussed in Section 5.3.

4. Results and analysis

Section 4 outlines the most significant findings from the questionnaire. The data is analysed and briefly commented upon. Subsection 4.1 gives an overview of participant distribution, while subsection 4.2 analyses the reported swearing frequency rates in English and L1. For the remaining subsections however, these factors will largely remain unexplored. Although age, gender, and language will be commented on throughout the following sections, no attempt has been made to analyse the offense of swear words within these variables, so Arabic speaking females aged 25-39 as opposed to Swahili male participants aged 16-24, e.g., will not be addressed. Mainly this is due to the high number of L1s reported in this study, as there is a total of 24 separate L1s conveyed. Section 4.3 shows the reported motivations for swearing, while Sections 4.4 - 4.6 deal with the various ratings given to the 17 included swear words. Section 4.4 looks at words deemed high in perceived offense, and Section 4.5 shows the analyses of the words deemed low in perceived offence. Section 4.6 illustrates the words that participants were least likely to be familiar with. Appendix 2 shows the full list of 17 swear words with the number of ratings, and Appendix 3 shows a table with these same statistics shown in percentages.

4.1. Distribution

The questionnaire received 88 answers in total, however some were removed for two main reasons; either the questionnaire was filled inn by a member of staff at the school in question, or the entire questionnaire was left blank, except the obligatory email slot. The data collected through *Nettskjema* could be shown in an Excel spreadsheet, and answers that were blank or filled by members of staff were manually removed before the data was analysed. This left 77 answers that were used in the analysis. Of these, 49 identified as female, and 28 as male. 18 participants were aged 16-24, 44 participants were aged 25-39, and 15 were aged 40+. Figure 1 shows the full age and gender distribution.

Figure 1: Participant distribution across age and gender, total number (% shown in column)

Participant distribution
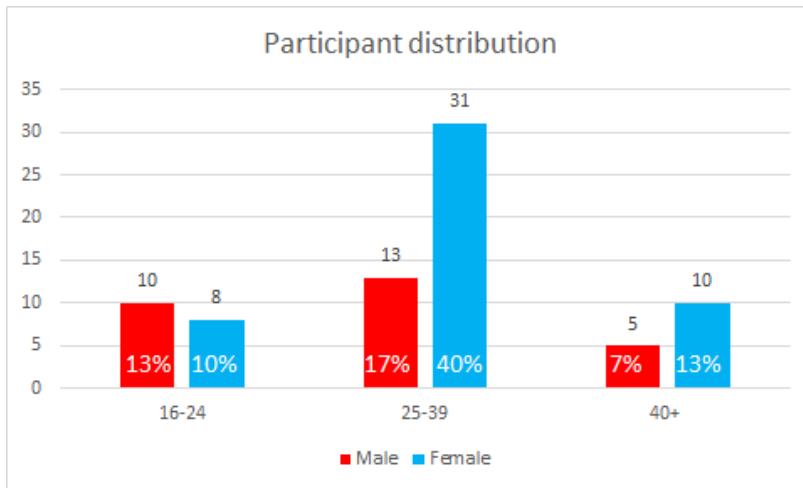
Almost twice as many females participated, with females aged 25-39 even exceeding the total number of male contributors. 57% of participants were in the age group 25-39, leaving 23% aged 18-24, and 20% aged 40+.

The participants were asked what they considered their first language, to which 24 separate languages were reported in total. Of these, 6 languages had five or more participants, Persian (≈17%, 13 participants), Arabic (≈14%, 11 participants), Russian (≈10%, 8 participants), Ukrainian (≈9%, 7 participants), Somali (≈6%, 5 participants), and Swahili (≈6%, 5 participants). Of the remaining 18, Kurdish and Tigrinya had 3 participants (≈4%), while Burmese, Dari, Lao, Pashto, Spanish, Suret, and Thai had 2 participants (≈3%). The remaining languages had only 1 participant (≈1%), Amharic, Farsi, French, Kinyarwanda, Nepali, Rohingya, Romania, Tagalog, and Tigré.

4.2 Self-reported frequency

Regarding their swearing frequency, participants were first asked how often they swear in English, followed by how often they swore in their L1. Figure 2 shows the distribution of answers, both in English and the various L1's.

Figure 2: Swearing frequency in English and L1

Frequency: In English and L1
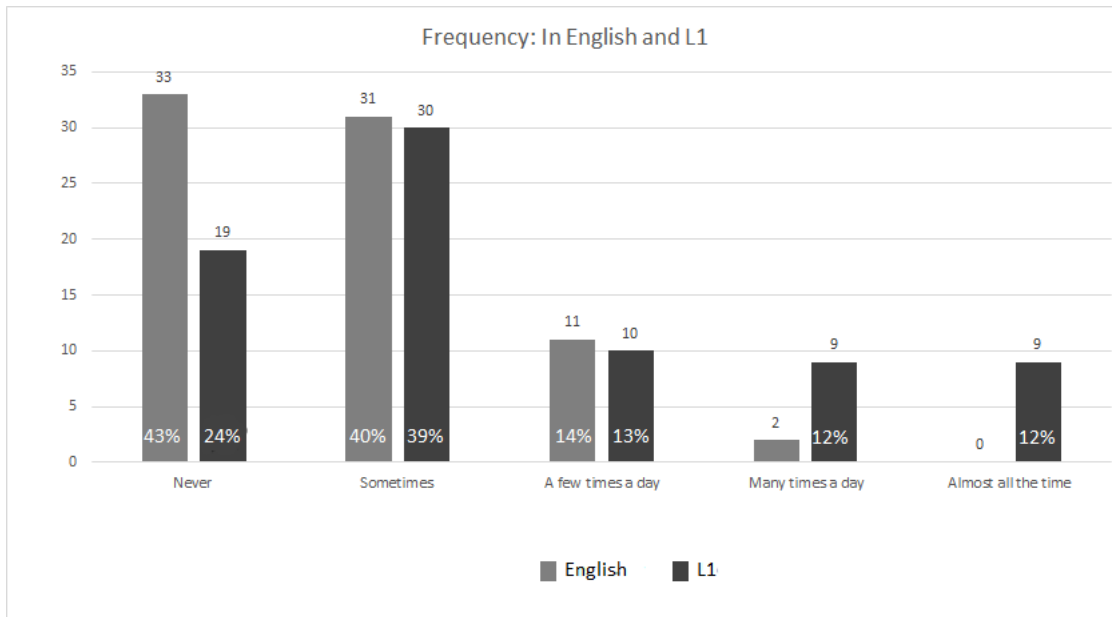
Participants generally reported low swearing frequency, particularly in English. 43% of participants self-report to "never" swear in English, closely followed by 40% stating they "sometimes" swear in English. The remaining participants largely stated to swear "a few times a day" (14%) in English, with only 3% of participants swearing "many times a day" and 0% selecting the option "almost all the time". Participants showed a tendency to give higher frequency ratings in their L1. 24% reported to never swear in their L1, compared to 43% in English. On the higher end of the scale, 12% said they swore "many times a day", and 12% said they swore "almost all the time" in their L1. Combining these options and comparing English and L1 shows that 3% swear with high frequency in English, while 24% swear with high frequency in their L1. Overall, however, participants in this study use swear words infrequently in both English and L1, with the combined total of "never" and "sometimes" 83% and 63% respectively. Using data from the options "never", "many times a day", and "almost all the time" in the participants L1 and comparing this to the reported gender of the participant, some interesting patterns emerge. 18% of males reported to swear "almost all the time" in their L1, compared to 8% of females. However, 89% of participants that chose "many times a day" were female. Combining "many times a day" and "almost all the time" reveals that 21% of males swear with high frequency in their L1 (6/28 participants), compared to 24% of females (12/49 participants). Moreover, when considering the gender distribution in the option "never", 24% of females said they never swore in their L1, in comparison to 25% of males.

Table 1: Frequency of swearing in participants L1

Frequency in L1	Male %	Female %	Total %
Never	25	24	24
Sometimes	35	41	39
A few times a day	18	10	13
Many times a day	4	17	12
Almost all the time	18	8	12

The same process applied to swearing frequency in English is also revealing. 49% of female participants said they never swore in English, and 41% said they sometimes swore in English. In comparison, 34% of males said they never swore in English, and 41% said they sometimes swore. Females are more likely than males to never swear in English, and inversely, males are significantly more likely to choose "a few times a day" for English. 25% of males opted for this option, opposed to only 8% of females. Table 2 shows an overview of swearing frequency in English, where gender has been taken into account.

Table 2: Frequency of swearing in English

Frequency in English	Male %	Female %	Total %
Never	32 %	49 %	43 %
Sometimes	39 %	41 %	40 %
A few times a day	25 %	8 %	14 %
Many times a day	4 %	2 %	3 %
Almost all the time	0 %	0 %	0 %

4.3 Self-reported reasons for swearing

The respondents were asked what motivations their swearing could have and were told that choosing more than one option was possible. From 77 participants, 155 reasons were given for swearing, with Figure 3 showing the full breakdown.

Figure 3: Self-reported reasons to swear

Reasons for swearing
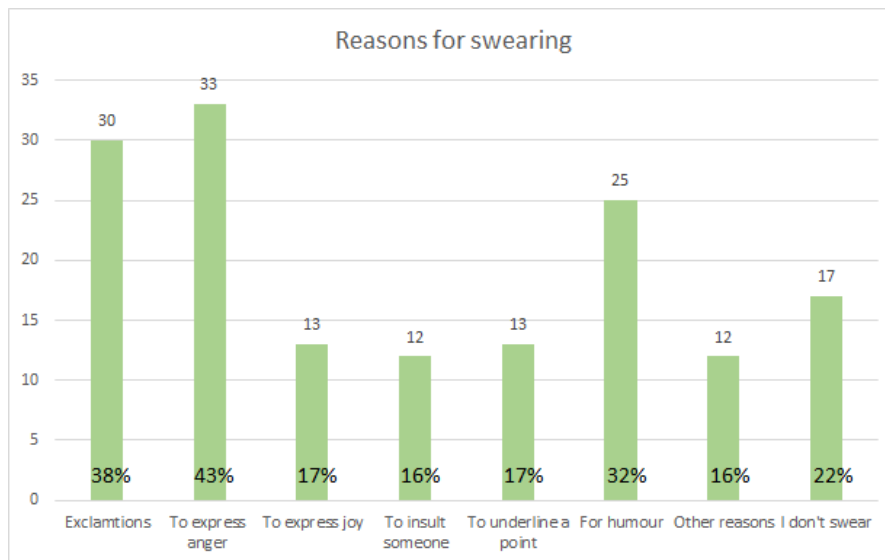
Expressing anger received the largest number of indications, yet revealingly, humoristic purposes also scored high. Likewise, using swear words as exclamations was a commonly given answer. The remaining options stayed close in rating yet were consistently half as popular as the three reasons mentioned above (excluding "I don't swear").

4.4 Most offensive swear words

Participants were asked to rate 17 English swear words on a scale with the following options: Very bad – Bad – Mild/OK – Not swearing – Don't know. Figure 4 shows the data collected from the 5 swear words with the highest ratings of "very bad".

Figure 4: Swear words with the highest scores of "very bad"

Highest scores of "very bad"

	Very bad	Bad	Mild/OK	Not swearing	Don't know
Fuck	29	20	20	1	7
Fuck you	39	17	14	0	7
Motherfucker	47	15	6	0	9
Bitch	33	16	14	2	12
Nigger	29	17	3	4	24
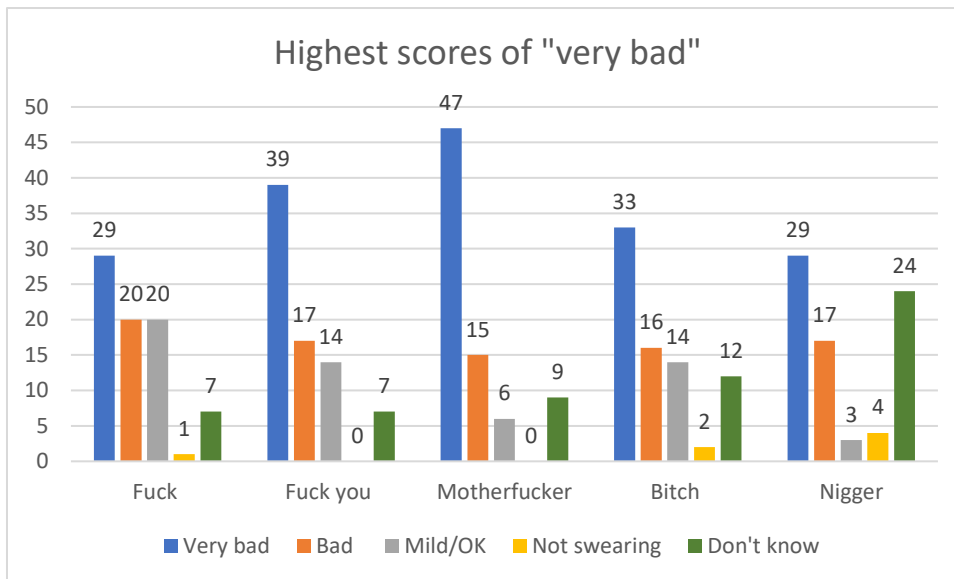
Fuck appears in three variations, the base form *fuck*, alongside *fuck you* and *motherfucker*. In addition to *bitch* and *nigger*, these five received the highest amount of "very bad" ratings from the participants. *Motherfucker* is by some margin the swear words with the highest offence rating, with 47 participants (61%) considering the word to be "very bad". Subtracting the number of participants to which the word was unknown and adding the number of "bad" ratings, reveals that only 9% of participants to which the word was known considered it "mild/OK". A similarity between the five most offensive terms is the low frequency of respondents categorising the words as "not swearing". Of the 17 words explored in this survey, *fuck you* and *motherfucker* are the only two that every participant viewed as a swear word. Another common trait for the swear words shown in Figure 4 (with the exception of *nigger*) is the relatively low frequency of "don't know" ratings. In comparing *fuck* and *nigger* for instance, it may appear that they are both approximately on equal levels of offense, yet subtracting the number of participants to which the word is unknown reveals a different impression. Of the 53 participants to which *nigger* was known, 87% considered it either "bad" or "very bad". In comparison, this was true for just 70% of the 70 participants to which *fuck* was known (see Section 5.3).

Subtracting the participants that were unfamiliar with the terms reveals that *bitch* was viewed as "bad" and "very bad" by 75% of participants, while the same is true of 87% when rating *nigger*. The same process applied to *whore* and *retard* shows that both these terms outrank *fuck* in terms of offense. In fact, *fuck* is not even amongst the top ten most offensive swear words. Table 3 illustrates the ten swear words participants were most likely to rate "bad" or "very bad", when the amount of "don't know" answers has been considered.

Table 3: Swear words with highest combined ratings of "bad" and "very bad"

Swear words	Bad (%)	Very bad (%)	Total (%)
1. Motherfucker	22 %	69 %	91 %
2. Nigger	32 %	55 %	87 %
3. Whore	33 %	53 %	86 %
4. Fuck you	24 %	56 %	80 %
5. Pussy	34 %	45 %	79 %
6. Dick	38 %	38 %	76 %
7. Retard	39 %	37 %	76 %
8. Bitch	25 %	50 %	75 %
9. Cunt	23 %	51 %	74 %
10. Asshole	33 %	40 %	73 %

Although the pragmatics of swearing allow for many of these words to be used in situations that are not inappropriate or offensive, they share one commonality, all ten can, and are often used, abusively (Lafreniere et al., 2022, p. 910, see section 2.2).

4.5 Least offensive swear words

To determine the least offensive swear words, I have cross compared three ratings, frequency of "very bad", "mild/OK", and "not swearing". Only four words were considered "very bad" by less than 10% of participants, *Jesus Christ (4%), Piss (4%), Paki (6%),* and *Jew (8%). Hell* and *retard* share fifth place, with 16% of participants deeming them "very bad" (see Appendix 3). Interestingly, *shit* has the highest count of "mild/OK" ratings (51% of all participants), with the rest in decreasing order being *hell* (38%), *fuck* (26%), *Jesus Christ (22%),* and *piss (19%). Jesus Christ* dominates the category "not swearing", with 40% of participants choosing this option. Following is *Jew, hell,* and *pussy,* with 16%, 14%, and 8% respectively. The four words that appear in at least 2/3 of the categories are *jew, piss, Jesus Christ,* and *hell,* visualised in Figure 6.

Figure 5: Least offensive words, based on "mild/OK", "not swearing", and "very bad" ratings

Least offensive swear words
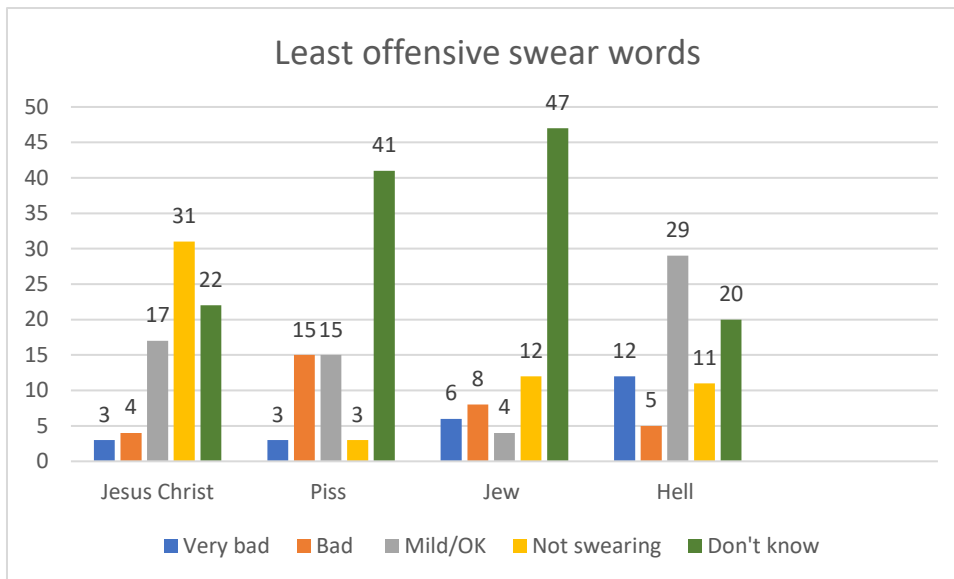
A closer analysis, however, reveals an interesting difference within these four words. As mentioned in section 4.4, the number of participants to which a given word is unknown must be subtracted from the total number of participants before an accurate picture of perceived offense is revealed. *Piss* and *jew* appear in Figure 6 (see Section 4.6), depicting the five words with the highest count of "don't know" tokens, a rating that contributes to cover the attitudes embedded in the data as it obscures how participants familiar with the term perceive offense. 47% of participants were familiar with the word *piss,* and of them 50% rated the word as "bad" or "very bad", while 50% rated the word "mild/Ok" or "not swearing". In other words, participants were equally likely to categorise the word as being bad, as they were to deem it mild. *Jew,* with "don't know" tokens removed, showed a slight tendency to deem the word as "mild/OK" or "not swearing" (21% combined) as compared to 18% for "bad" and "very bad". Although neither *Jesus Christ* nor *hell* is exclusive to Christianity, it is interesting that these should score overall lowest on offence. *Hell* does have more "mild/OK" tokens than *Jesus Christ,* yet apart from this the remaining categories reveal that *Jesus Christ* is the overall least offensive. Of the 71% of participants that had prior knowledge of the word *Jesus Christ*, 87% categorised it as either "mild/OK" or "not swearing". *Hell* on the other hand had a combined "bad" and "very bad" rating of 70% when subtracting the participants to which the word was unknown. In sum, three words inhabit the characteristic that, when factoring in the number of participants to which the word is unknown, the majority of participants considered them "mild/OK" or "not swearing". *Jew, hell,* and *Jesus Christ*, the only three words with explicit religious connotations, also appear as the three least offensive within the questionnaire data.

Shit was excluded from Figure 5 as 35% of participants rated it "very bad" (18%) or "bad" (17%), and only 5% felt the word was not a swear word. However, *shit* was deemed "mild/OK" by 51% of participants. In addition, *shit* had, with *fuck* and *fuck you*, the lowest chance of being unknown to the participants (9% rated "don't know"). The fact that the word *shit* had such a high chance of being known as well as seldom being deemed "not swearing" gives it a unique position within the data. Of all the 17 words used in the questionnaire, participants found *shit* the least offensive word that was still largely considered a swear word. In comparison, *Jesus Christ* was most likely to be described as something other than a swear word. Table 4 shows the five words participants were most likely to deem either "mild/OK" or "not swearing".

Table 4: Words with high counts of "mild/OK" and "not swearing"

Swear words	Mild/OK (%)	Not swearing (%)	Total (%)
1. Jesus Christ	31 %	56 %	87 %
2. Hell	51 %	19 %	70 %
3. Shit	56 %	6 %	62 %
4. Jew	11 %	40 %	51 %
5. Piss	42 %	8 %	50 %

Shit and *piss* share a few commonalities, they are the only two words used in the questionnaire that explicitly denote bodily functions and are also the only two words participants largely categorised as a swear word yet deemed "mild/OK". The five words participants found least offensive fall into one of two themes, religiosity or bodily functions. Nevertheless, Table 4 shows that participants generally regarded the majority of the swear words used as either "bad" or "very bad", as the five words in Table 4 are the only words that are more likely to be deemed "mild/OK" or "not swearing" (apart from *piss,* that has a 50/50 chance of being deemed offensive).

4.6 Least known words

As participants are language learners and not native speakers of English, it is unsurprising that some of the words may be unknown to them. Figure 6 shows the 5 swear words participants were least likely to know.

Figure 6: Words with highest counts of "don't know"

Least known words

	Very bad	Bad	Mild/OK	Not swearing	Don't know
Piss	3	15	15	3	41
Jew	6	8	4	12	47
Paki	5	3	5	1	63
Cunt	16	7	5	3	46
Retard	12	13	6	2	44
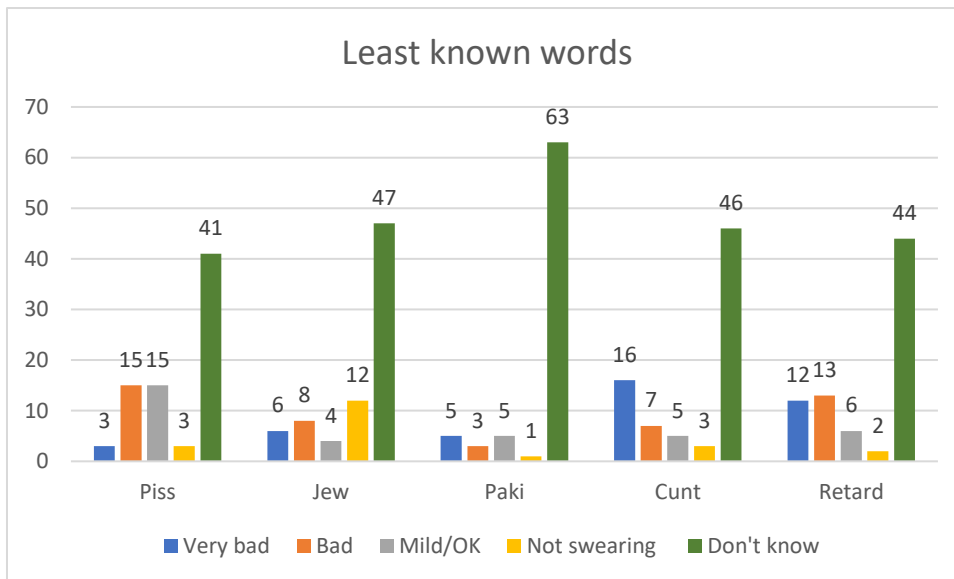
By some margin, *Paki* was the word most likely to be unknown to the participants, with 82% stating they have no prior knowledge of its meaning. The remaining words have an average 58% of participants unfamiliar with the term, yet *cunt* and *retard* show a significantly higher frequency of "very bad" ratings by participants who are familiar with the terms. An observation shared for the listed words in Figure 6 is that more than half the participants were unfamiliar with their meaning. Although these five exhibited a particularly high tendency to be unknown to the participants, many of the words used in the survey had a considerable number of responders state they did not know their meaning. Only five words were known by more than 80% of participants, *bitch (16% "don't know"), motherfucker (12%), fuck you (9%), fuck (9%),* and *shit (9%).* The uniformity of the three with the lowest score made an investigation necessary, as it looked like 7 participants may have consistently rated every word as "don't know". If this was the case, I would have felt it was more reflective of the surveyed group to remove these answers from the analysed data, as I find it unlikely that nearly 10% of the participants in this study have no prior knowledge to any of the 17 words used. Fortunately, this was not the case and although some participants were only familiar with 1-2 of the included swear words, each of the 77 participants showed variation in their ratings.

5 Discussion

5.1 Frequency and distribution

An initial and rather surprising finding was the distribution of gender and swearing frequency. Gauthier and Guille (2017) and Vingerhoets et al. (2013) present conflicting findings regarding gender specific frequency of English swearing, with the former using a MySpace corpus to investigate the claim that males swear more frequently than females, and the latter pointing to observational studies that contradict this claim. Within the MySpace corpus emerged the impression that males did swear more frequently than females, a notion that according to Gauthier and Guille (2017) has been persistent for some time. As indicated in section 4.1, the data collected from the survey did not confirm this claim. Categorising "never" and "sometimes" as low frequency, and "many times a day" and "almost all the time" as high frequency, reveals that the participants were equally likely to fall into either category irrespective of gender in their L1 (see Table 1, Section 4.2). Considering that 24 languages are reported amongst 77 participants, it is reasonable to presume the participants have a highly varied relationship to swearing depending on what culture they grew up in. This makes the finding that swearing frequency is uniform between the genders in L1 even more striking, as the recent trend that females are reporting higher frequency of swearing appears to be a global phenomenon. Admittedly, the sample size is small and in no way sufficient for drawing conclusions on the language communities in question (see Section 4). However, the surveyed students at *Voksenopplæringen* learning English today show patterns that are closer to Vingerhoets et al. (2013). As swearing has been viewed as a masculine activity, males and females have therefore subconsciously been socially conditioned to answer from this premise, causing males to overemphasize their frequency, and females to minimise their swearing habits. Observational research has shown that when results are not self-reported, the gender difference is drastically reduced (Vingerhoets et al., 2013, p. 298). This study has self-reported answers yet conforms to the emerging pattern of a more equal distribution of swearing frequency. However, this is only the case for participants L1.

In English, swearing frequency was generally lower than in L1, most significantly for females (see Table 2, Section 4.2). Females were twice as likely to report that they never swore in English than in their L1, with 49% of females stating they never swear in English. This means that half the female participants claim not to use the words that are in the questionnaire at all, explaining in part why many swear words were rated "don't know" (see Section 5.5). Males on the other hand had 32% stating they never swear in English, yet 25% said they swear in

English "a few times a day". 8% of females said they swore "a few times a day" in English, showing that males are more likely to use English swear words than females in this study. Beers Fägersten (2007, p. 32) found that females tended to be more aware of how their speech is perceived by listeners and are more sensitive to the possibility of offensiveness than males. Dewaele (2016) also points out that language learners re-adjust the meaning of emotion-laden words (e.g. swear words) for each exposure, and that the highly context dependent offensiveness of swear words can deter learners from using these words until their pragmatic understanding of the language is more complex. Considering both these insights, females in this study could foreseeable be deterred from English swearing to a greater extent than males because they are more conscious of causing offense. Re-adjusting these notions becomes challenging when usage is dissuaded, thereby making females less likely to explore the spectrum of appropriateness that swear words exist within.

5.2 Reasons for swearing

Participants were shown a list of possible motivations for swearing and asked to select the option(s) that best described their reasons for using swear words (see Figure 3, section 4.3). Calculating percentages is made challenging by the fact that participants could chose multiple options. Overall, 155 answers were given, yet there could only be a maximum of 77 (total number of participants) in each category. Percentages are therefore calculated by dividing the number of participants that voted for a given option with the total number of participants in this study. I also wish to highlight a limitation of the question on which this discussion is based, as well as an overall limitation of the survey. The question given to participants was "in what situations do you swear?", not explicitly asking what language the question relates to. This has caused a need to assume, and the assumption is that participants have mainly answered from the perspective of English swear words. Participants were informed that the survey was explicitly devised to discover what attitudes they had to English swear words, and the options themselves are written in English. On the other hand, language itself becomes highly tangled when one considers the backdrop for the data collection. A total of 77 adults from 24 language communities (many with multiple L1s) learning English in Norway are being surveyed about English swear words in translated oral Norwegian. If indeed the participants answered from a more general, non-English specific perspective, I would still consider the insight relevant to English swear words, as participants have subconsciously

committed how they understand English swearing to their overall perception of what motivations swearing can have.

Exclamations can be viewed as cathartic swearing, a practice that is involuntary and usually seen as the least offensive applications of swear words (see Section 2.1). It is rather surprising that only 39% (30 counts) of participants chose this option, as the reflex to utilize a swear word in times of sudden emotional shifts seems almost a universal tendency. Studies have for some time pointed to swearing as reducing pain and increasing pain tolerance, revealing that chemical reactions in the brain can be modified by oral production (Stephens & Robertson, 2020). However, I suspect the reason "exclamations" received a relatively low rating is because of the word itself. The word *exclamations* is a multisyllabic, infrequently used word that students may never have encountered. In translating the questions for the participants (see Section 3.3), I also struggled to find a Norwegian equivalent. Instead, I would usually demonstrate with stubbing a toe or being taken off guard, likely leaving the full range of outbursts within the term "exclamations" unknown to the participants. Additionally, expressing anger (43%) can in some ways be understood as exclamations, as pain is usually associated with a kind of anger.

An inherent problem with all the choices the participants could choose from is the fact that there is no context to the options (see Section 3.4). As mentioned above, expressing pain and expressing anger can in many instances be synonymous, like when physical pain is inflicted by one's own error. If you stub your toe on a doorjamb and exclaim *fuck* as you curse the existence of the piece of wood, you are essentially expressing anger at an inanimate object, even though the utterance itself is an exclamation. The reason I draw attention to this is that I find it inaccurate to claim that the most likely reason students at V*oksenopplæringen* use to swear is in expressing anger towards another person. The option "to insult someone" is the least selected alternative, with only 16 % stating they use swear words for this purpose (12 counts). There is then a discrepancy of 23% (21 counts) between "to express anger" and "to insult someone", or in other words, 21 participants said they would use swearing to express anger yet would not swear to insult someone. Relatedly, all swear words in Table 3 (Section 4.4) can be categorised as abusive terminology (e.g., *motherfucker, whore)*, showing a clear correlation between the least likely reason to swear and highest offense. Nicolau and Sukamto (2014, p. 73) found that Indonesian international school students were most likely to suggest that anger motivated their swearing, a finding juxtaposed to the notion that swearing is most often "not [used when] highly emotional, confrontational, rude, or aggressive" (Jay &

Janschewitz, 2008, p. 268). These participant groups are not directly comparable, as they are at different levels of English proficiency and come from a more homogenous language background that is not represented in this thesis. Nevertheless, participants with 24 separate L1s were most likely to select "to express anger" as the reason they swear.

The fact that anger scored highest in Nicolau and Sukamto's study (2014) and in this current study shows that there is still a negatively charged baseline association with swear words. Inversely, humour and excitement also score high on self-reported reasons to swear. Nicolau and Sukamto (2014, p. 73) found "excitement" to be the second-most popular choice, and in this study, "for humour" was the second-most self-reported voluntary reason, with 32% (25 counts) of participants choosing this option (see Figure 3, Section 4.3). A duality in how participants view their motivations for swearing is revealed, pointing to a widespread attitude that swearing can have politic applications (see Section, 2.2). Participants from 24 language backgrounds showed a 7% difference in choosing "for anger" (39%) and "for humour" (32%), revealing that swear words are viewed as a tool for communicating frustration, as well as a tool to make people laugh, unobstructed by language boundaries. Irrespective of what language the participants have based their answers on, the fact that swearing is imagined as a multi-layered instrument in the first place is telling of what potential acquiring English swear words can have.

5.3 Most offensive swear words

Participants were asked to rate 17 English swear words on a scale with the following options: Very bad – Bad – Mild/OK – Not swearing – Don't know (see Section 4.4). "Don't know" is often used in questionnaires for the participant to indicate that they do not know what rating to give, yet here it was made explicit both in writing (see Appendix 1) and orally to participants that selecting "don't know" means they are unfamiliar with what the word means. To get the most accurate estimate of perceived offense, I have chosen to calculate percentages by subtracting the number of participants that selected "don't know" for a given word from the total number of participants that took part in the survey. See Appendix 3 for a complete list of all the swear words used in the questionnaire, with participant rating shown in percentage without the above-mentioned process applied. For this section, and section 5.4, the aim is to discuss perceived offensiveness when participants are familiar with the swear word.

Beers Fägersten (2007) demonstrates that when asked to rate a word with no context, participants tend to give higher ratings of offense than if the swear word is incorporated into a phrase. This is of course dependent on how the sentence is formulated, and the speaker-listener relationship if this information is available for the participants. The inflected form of *fuck, fucking,* was given an offence score of 2.5 in one set of circumstances ("*those are some fucking cool shoes" (*Beers Fägersten, 2007, p. 29), and a 5.0 rating in a different configuration (*"he's probably out fucking his girlfriend" (*Beers Fägersten, 2007, p. 28). The word *fuck* without any context received a score of 5.0 (Beers Fägersten, 2007, p. 19). In other words, we tend to increase the perceived severity of a swear word if not prompted otherwise. I draw attention to this as participants in this study are rating the swear words as single words, not fitted into a sentence, with no indication of who is speaking to whom. Nevertheless, participant ratings showed that the three most offensive swear words were *motherfucker (91%), nigger (87%),* and *whore (86%)* (see Table 3, Section 4.4). The percentages indicate the combined total of "very bad" and "bad" ratings and have taken into account the number of participants that did not know the word.

Motherfucker has been revealed to be amongst the most offensive swear word when included in similar questionnaires (Millwood-Hargrave, 2000, Beers Fägersten, 2007, Hagen, 2013, Gjesdal, 2017, Westerholm, 2017, Lundström, 2019). With the exception of Lundström (2019), these studies have been conducted on native English-speakers. *Motherfucker* was by some considerable amount the swear word with the highest count of "very bad" (69%, see Table 3, Section 4.4), which begs the question, why is this the case? *Motherfucker* has some interesting properties, amongst them, being a compound of two taboo themes. *Fuck* is, as mentioned in Section 2.2, particularly malleable with a wide array of meanings, yet its first definition in the dictionary is "copulate" (Merriam-Webster, n.d., *fuck)*. Ljung's (2011) *mother* theme relates to the wider theme of kinship and family. In Arabic (≈14%, 11 participants), of the 14 words and phrases found to elicit the strongest emotional reactions, many relate to both sexual activity/organs, as well as kinship. Examples include "'ayri be emak' (fuck your mother) […] 'kess oukhtak' (your sister's pussy) […] 'neek kouss omak sharmouta' (fuck your bitch mother's pussy)" (Abi-Esber, 2017, p. 72). These phrases are less ambiguous than *motherfucker* and are clearly used as directed abuse. This could also help explain why both *whore* and *pussy* appear amongst the 5 words deemed most offensive (see Table 3, Section 4.4). Kinship is a socially constructed idea that has multiple variations in how it is imagined, yet it is also a biological fact that no society escapes from (Strathern,

1992). So is sex, as this act is what ultimately leads to people being genetically related. With the exception of *nigger,* the top 5 most offensive words (*motherfucker, whore, fuck you, pussy)* are either explicitly or implicitly sexually themed.

Directedness clearly has a role in how participants perceive a swear word. *Fuck you* is a phrase and not a single word, a phrase that in this case establishes who is on the receiving end. Although *fuck you* can have politic or neutral usages, with no context the assumption becomes negatively charged. *Fuck you* has the second highest count of "very bad" ratings (56%), while *fuck* has 41%. *Fuck* was also deemed "mild/ok" by 29% of participants that were familiar with the term, yet this is also the case for 20% of participants when rating *fuck you*. This data demonstrates that signalling that a word is directed adds to the severity of how it is perceived. Albeit a fraction of what context could be added to a phrase or word to signal the location and speaker-listener relationship, a single pronoun changed the combined rating of "bad" and "very bad" from 70% (*fuck*), to 86% (*fuck you*). The fact both words have a significant number of participants rating them "mild/ok" is telling of the subjective nature of offense, what is offense to some may be trivial to others. Dewaele (2016) found that language learners tend to overestimate the offense of swear words in the language they are acquiring, yet inversely, the emotional effect of swear words will in most cases remain strongest in L1 (Dewaele, 2014). The overestimation comes from the assumed offense participants think native speakers take to the word, rather than what emotional effect the word evokes within themselves. Interestingly, *fuck* has been rated significantly less offensive in this study than it has in native English-speaking studies (Millwood-Hargrave, 2000, Beers Fägersten, 2007, Hagen, 2013, Gjesdal, 2017). This is reminiscent to how the word *fuck* is viewed in Norway, as the word has been incorporated into the Norwegian vocabulary, its usage is more frequent, leading offense to be perceived less severely (Fjeld et al, 2019).

Racial abuse is particularly offensive in many western countries, with *nigger* being considered most offensive in the US (Beers Fägersten, 2007, p. 19), the UK (Hagen, 2013, p. 56, specifically in the age group 20-30), and in Sweden/Finland (Lundström, 2019, p. 32). Although surpassed by *motherfucker* in this study, *nigger* was the second most offensive term for the participants (see Table 3, Section 4.4). This historically laden and racially charged slur has increased in offense over the past 25 years, Millwood-Hargrave (2000, p. 9) reports swear word offense data from 1997 and 2000, and within 3 years *nigger* rose from 11th to 5th on the severity scale. Using the same 28 words as Millwood-Hargrave (2000) reported on, Hagen (2013, p. 56) found that *nigger* had reached the topmost on offense ratings for 20–30-year-old

native British English speakers by 2013. I found it a tad surprising that as many as 31% of participants did not know what the word means, however, when the word was known for the participants, they rated it highly offensive. The unfortunate reality is that many in this participants group are at risk of racially motivated abuse. In addressing the decline of perceived offense in religious themed swearing, Persson (2011, p. 6) points to ethnic slurs as being the modern equivalent of Medieval European blasphemy. Although not punishable by death, the consequences can range from social rejection to getting fired (DeLuc, 2022).

Judging perceived offense is made difficult by the lack of insight as to how participants have understood the various swear words. The first point I wish to raise is translation. Participants were asked not to search for definitions and translations of the swear words, as the aim was to uncover their attitudes to English swear words that they were aware of prior to the questionnaire being conducted. An inherent problem with attitude research into emotional severity in a foreign language is the separation of associations, are participants reacting to the English swear words, or the equivalent in their L1? I observed the word *pussy* being Googled and subsequently being rated "very bad" based on the Arabic equivalent the participant found. This makes the question of offense more problematic to assess, as the inherited, culturally embedded association of a given word is challenging to separate from words acquired later in life in a foreign language (Dewaele, 2014). Relatedly, certain words are perceived differently cross-culturally to such an extent that assessing an attitude becomes highly complicated. To exemplify, the word *gay* was originally included in the list of swear words yet had to be removed. The reason for this was that participants in the first class understood the term not as derogatory abuse but rather as a description. A few participants mentioned that *being* gay was what was "very bad", not the offense the term could cause when used as a pejorative. In part this is my fault, as the word itself is used as a perfectly acceptable description of a sexual preference and was not integrated into a phrase to indicate the potential emotional effect intended by its utterance. Moreover, I am not claiming the attitudes expressed in this context are indicative of how homosexuality is viewed by students at *Voksenopplæringen,* yet the fact that this attitude was made explicit made me apprehensive to include it further, and *gay* was ultimately removed from the questionnaire.

The final observation I want to draw attention to when discussing perceived offense is the fact that terms associated with women scored high. *Bitch* appears in Figure 4 (p. xx) as one of the words with the highest count of "very bad" (43% of all participants). The word is surpassed only by *motherfucker* and *fuck you* in this statistic. It should be noted that *whore* (45%)

received a significantly higher count of "don't know" than *bitch* (16%), yet when taking these numbers into account, *whore* was viewed as very bad by 53% of participants that were familiar with the word, and 50% for *bitch*. *Pussy* appears as the fifth most offensive term (see Table 3, Section 4.4) when "don't know" ratings are considered, again pointing to the increase in perceived severity when the term is female-related. A possible explanation for this could be that female-related swear words are considered as stronger taboos in the language communities participants come from, such as the above-mentioned tendency for Arabic swearing to include female relatives and female genitalia (Abi-Ester, 2017). Another possible contribution to this observation is that 64% of participants identify as female, thereby increasing the offense felt when presented with words like *bitch* and *whore.*

5.4 Low offence

Participant ratings revealed that two categories emerged as the least offensive, religiosity and bodily functions. The former had three words, *Jesus Christ, hell,* and *jew,*, while the latter had two, *shit* and *piss*. All 5 were amongst the 5 most least offensive words (see Table 4, Section 4.5). When the survey was being conducted, I was regularly asked if *Jesus Christ* and *jew* were English swear words. I would let participants know that it was perfectly acceptable to not consider there words as being swear words, reflected in their much higher ratings of "not swearing" (56% for *Jesus Christ,* 41% for *jew*). Comparably, *hell* had 19%, while *shit* had 6%. For the religiosity category then, participants did not only consider them mild, they also saw them as something separate from swearing. Religiosity has seen a decrease in perceived severity in the UK, with Millwood-Hargrave's (2000, p. 9) data from 1997 showing that *Jesus Christ* was 26th (of 28) in terms of overall offense and jew at 24th. A slightly interesting contrast is how blasphemy is perceived throughout the world, particularly in Muslim majority countries. Now, it must be pointed out that I do not have an overview of the participants nationality, nor their religious beliefs, however, 13% of participants reported to have Persian as an L1. In Iran, blasphemy is punishable by death, sadly being demonstrated by the state's increase in executions following the ongoing public revolt against Islamic doctrines (582 cases in 2022 (Gritten, 2023)). In this study, the lack of context may explain why words like *Jesus Christ, hell* and *jew* were seen as so inoffensive, as well as the fact that none were incorporated into phrases.

Rating for s*hit* and *piss* differ in interesting ways. *Shit* was among the three words with lowest counts of "don't know", together with *fuck* and *fuck you*, only 9% of the total number of

participants did not know the word. *Piss,* on the other hand, was unknown for 53% of participants. As has been touched upon, *shit* is a commonly used word, and paired with *fuck*, the two make up about 50% of public swearing in the US (Fjeld et al., 2019, p. 86). Although not comparable to *shit's* prevalence in Norway, it is telling of how integrated *shit* is in the English swearing vocabulary. *Shit* can easily be understood as neutral or politic, *he's the shit* or *you scared the shit out of me*, an attitude reflected in the participants rating for this word. By some margin, *shit* was the word that most participants deemed "mild/ok", with 56% of participants to which the word was known opting for this alternative (51% of all participants). Few (6%) considered the word to not be a swear word (see Table 4, Section 4.5), indicating that participants are aware of the neutral and politic aspects of *shit*, and by extension, swearing in general. *Shit* and *piss* depict bodily functions, a category that may be one of our earliest taboo experimentations. In a Freudian sense, children exhibit a fascination for bodily functions early in life, and as shown in Millwood-Hargrave's (2000, p. 8) "topography of swearing", baby talk includes words like *poo* and *wee*. This is also the least offensive swear word category. The taboo nature of bodily functions has been experimented with since childhood, and in doing so, it has altered how we perceive offense. Abi-Ester (2017, p. 72) lists Arabic swear words with weak taboos, and these include "'khol khara' (eat poo)" and "'fouss' (fart)".

5.5 Uknown words

The fact that the three words with fewest counts of "don't know" in the questionnaire still had almost 10% of the participants choosing this option was a surprising observation, yet there are some key factors for why this is the case. Swearing is both largely learned and practiced orally, with certain words like *fucking* being 20 times more likely to occur in oral than in written communication, as shown in corpus analyses (McEnery & Xiao, 2004, p. 236). The questionnaire included a question asking participants what language they spoke at home, and only 4 participants said they spoke English. Informal discussions with the surveyed classes revealed that participants consumed the majority of their media in other languages than English. Even when viewing English-speaking media, swear words are often accompanied by a covering beep, and are frequently substituted with asterisks in subtitling and other written renditions. The English language does not seem to hold a strong position in the participants daily lives, leading to low exposure to swear words and with it, few opportunities to contextualise meaning and area of use (Dewaele, 2016, p. 123). Table 2 (Section 4.2) is also

telling of the degree of engagement participants have with using English swearing, 43% said they never swear in English, while 40% said they swear occasionally. A word like *cunt* scores high in offense in Britain where it has a culturally embedded position, yet only 40% of the participants that took part in the questionnaire knew its meaning. However, over 50% of the participants that were familiar with the term labelled *cunt* "very bad". This shows that the word itself has limited ability to enter the vocabulary of the participant group, yet when it does it tends to bring some of the cultural baggage. Learning a foreign word entails a certain amount of context for the learner to put it to use, especially true of pragmatically complicated terms such as swear words. The fact that *cunt* is viewed as an offensive term in the UK (e.g.) may be enough for the learner to also label it as such. Offense is learnable, and as cultures change so do our language patterns, and new phrases substitute what we once viewed as offensive (Persson, 2011). Then again, *cunt*, even when factoring in the number of participants that did not know the meaning, only scored as 9th most offensive in this survey. Although some cultural expectations are transferred when learning a language, clearly, some of the effect may be lost.

The context in which language learning takes place plays a vital role in how the language is learned and absorbed. An important distinction when it comes to the participant group is the fact that they have not actively sought out an English course. They are learning English and Norwegian simultaneously as part of the obligatory Primary Education needed to progress to Higher Education. Conversations with teachers at *Voksenopplæringen* revealed that many students are unmotivated by the magnitude of what is required to progress to the vocation they wish to obtain. Norwegian Primary Education (10 years) is compressed into a 2–3-year course that puts pressure on the students as the subjects range from natural and social science to English and maths. One of the textbooks that is used in English education for adults in Norway is *Grip 1* (Kvam et al., 2020). In its opening pages they point out that Norwegian language education is prioritised over English, as Norwegian is the language they are most likely to meet both within and outside school hours (Kvam et al., 2020, p. 8). If this textbook is taken as an indication of the wider aim of English education for adult immigrants in Norway, the main purpose is to learn basic competence and communication abilities at this stage in their education. A "find in publication" word search in the digital edition of *Grip 1* reveals that not a single one of the 17 swear words in the questionnaire is found in this particular textbook. Although this is perhaps not surprising, I found it notable that the word "swear" also did not show up in the word search, and the same is true of "curse", "profanity",

and the Norwegian equivalent "*banning*". To me, this indicates that swearing is not touched upon in this textbook at all, and although this does not verify that the phenomenon is not discussed in a classroom setting, it does indicate that this is not a priority.

6. Conclusion

This thesis aimed at finding what English swear words have entered the vocabularies of students at *Voksenopplæringen*, and what attitudes arise when they have been acquired. In sum, the participants generally viewed abusive terminology as the most offensive category, a trend reflected in many attitude studies from various language communities that use English swear words. Interestingly, female-specific terms such as *whore* and *pussy* scored higher than they have done in similar studies from native English-speaking countries, while the racially abusive word *nigger* scored lower than usual. Although minute compared to the contextual investigations done by Dewaele, Beers Fagersten, and Vingerhoets et al. to name a few, the fact that the added *you* in *fuck you* increased the offensiveness of *fuck* by 10% indicates that participants are aware of how directedness affects perceived offense. All ten words listed in Table 3 (Section 4.4) as the most offensive can be, and often are, used as directed insults attacking a characteristic in the recipient, all with negative connotations. *Dick, pussy,* and *asshole* are slight exceptions, as they can be used both descriptively as well as abusively. The ten words listed as most offensive exclusively denote various directed abuse (minority, disability, gendered), and bodily anatomy. On the opposite end, two categories emerged as least offensive, bodily function and religiosity. *Piss* was perceived as more offensive than *shit*, yet both were seen as more offensive then the swear words within religiosity. Bearing in mind the limited exposure many of the participants have had to English swear words, it is particularly striking that patterns observed within this paper's participants so closely resemble data gathered from native English-speaking countries. In many ways, the impression emerges that this participant group is as Hagen (2013) would put it, liberally minded.

The lack of experience with certain words has been explored, and although this may seem like a limitation, there is insight to be found in a perceived lack of data. Participants consistently showed diversity in their answers, and when taking the number of participants that did not know a given swear word, the data showed that participants are at least partly aware of how offense is perceived in native English-speaking countries. *Cunt* was unfamiliar to 60% of participants yet of the remaining 40%, 74% viewed the word as being "bad" or "very bad". A variety of reasons for why many of the words were unknown to the participants have been discussed, amongst them the lower likelihood of having encountered the word in its written

form, and cultural boundaries differentiating the propensity of certain words. The consensus amongst the participants seems to be that most swear words explored here can be categorised as offensive, as only 4/17 words were more likely to be deemed "mild/OK" or "not swearing" than "bad" or "very bad". However, the fact that *Jesus Christ, Jew, Hell,* and *shit* all shared the common trait of being viewed as more mild than offensive shows that what defines a swear word is dependent on the eye of the beholder, and although a language learner is presented with a list of "bad" words, they independently define what this means to them on an individual level. An inquiry into one of the possible textbooks used in *Voksenopplæringen* shows that the pragmatics of swearing is not taught in school, nor is the phenomenon even touched upon at all. This means that the attitudes participants have reported come either from formal education elsewhere, or more likely, from their informal interactions with English throughout their lives.

6. 1 Further research

The most glaring need is to incorporate additional context for the participants to make more informed judgments of offensiveness. As it stands, this paper has not taken contextual markers such as location and speaker-listener relationship into account. Additionally, the swear words stand alone and are not fitted into phrases, a detail that has shown to drastically alter the perceived offensiveness of a given word. I was apprehensive to include this line of inquiry for fears of comprehension issues, as well as the fact that this topic is previously unexplored in Adult Education Programs in Norway. For further research I would suggest that contextual factors and phrase incorporation be examined, yet I do not think the methodology used in this paper would be sufficient. This leads to the second suggestion, a mixed or qualitative approach, or alternatively, a different type of quantitative approach. Surveys can be constructed that include contextual markers, yet I would still be apprehensive of this if there is not an element of oral engagement as well. Swear words are much more frequent in oral speech production, and additionally, answering orally can increase the means with which a language learner can express their opinions. Opting for a qualitative approach would reveal personal insight that a quantitative approach cannot accomplish, and alternatively, a mixed approach would combine breadth and depth to reveal a more nuanced attitude impression. Exploring context through a mixed approach would bypass some comprehension issues and deepen our understanding of how swear words are acquired and perceived in adult language learners.

Another avenue where this paper loses potential is in the participants language backgrounds. For this paper's scope the participants have been merged into a single unit for large parts of the analysis and discussion. Further research could take greater care to distinguish the language communities, and the way in which language backgrounds shape the acquisition of English swear words in adulthood. To do this, the included L1s could be limited to the most frequently found in *Voksenopplærignen.* I do not have any data to say what these languages are in actuality, but based on the data from Section 4.1, *Persian*, *Arabic, Ukrainian, Russian, Swahili,* and *Somali* may be a good place to start. Having this as a premise, a subsequent study could include words from each of these languages (distributed based on L1), and a comparison could be made between how these individual language communities view English swearing, as well as how the strongest taboos in a given L1 impact on perceived offense of English swear words. Relatedly, a widened scope and a larger number of participants could reveal interesting distinctions between genders and age groups. Although these are frequently investigated sociodemographic variables, there are still interesting observations to be made, especially as these variables have largely been explored from a native English-speaker perspective. Including an investigation into where participants learn English swear words would also be beneficial to fully understand what role media, informal interactions, formal education play in swear words acquisition and comprehension.

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Appendices:

Appendix 1:

Transcript of the questionnaire with all options and descriptions (originally created in Nettskjema)

What age are you?

- 18-24
- 25-39
- 40+

What gender do you identify as?

- Male
- Female
- Other

Is English your first language?

- Yes
- No

What language do you consider your first language?

[_____] (open question)

What language do you mostly speak at home?

[_____] (open question)

How often do you swear in English?

- Almost all the time
- Many times a day
- A few times a day
- Sometimes

- Never

How often do you swear in your first language?

- Almost all the time
- Many times a day
- A few times a day
- Sometimes
- Never

In what situations do you swear? More than one answer is possible

- As exclamations (pain, surprise, etc.)
- To express anger
- To express joy
- To insult someone
- To underline a point
- For humour
- Other reasons
- I don't swear

English swear words - how bad are they? You will presented with a list of English swear words. For each word, use the scale to show how bad you think the word is. "Mild/OK" means you consider the word to be a swear word but you think it is fine to use. "Not swearing" means you do not think the word is a swear word. If you do not know the word select "Don't know". (description shown to participants)

	Very bad	Bad	Mild/OK	Not swearing	Don't know
Fuck					
Asshole					
Pussy					
Motherfucker					
Jesus Christ					

Shit					
Retard					
Dick					
Whore					
Paki					
Piss					
Nigger					
Cunt					
Jew					
Hell					
Fuck you					
Bitch					

(This last question was formatted differently in Nettskjema, with circles to click for participants to rate the individual words)

Appendix 2:

Figure showing participants ratings for all the included swear words, shown in number of counts.

All swear words : number of counts

Word	Don't know	Not swearing	Mild/OK	Bad	Very bad
Bitch	12	1	15	16	33
Fuck you	7	0	14	17	39
Hell	20	11	29	5	12
Jew	47	12	4	8	6
Cunt	46	3	5	7	16
Nigger	24	4	3	17	29
Piss	41	3	15	15	3
Paki	63	1	5	3	5
Whore	35	1	5	14	22
Dick	22	4	9	21	21
Retard	44	2	6	13	12
Shit	7	4	39	13	14
Jesus Christ	22	31	17	4	3
Motherfucker	9	0	6	15	47
Pussy	21	6	6	19	25
Asshole	29	3	10	16	19
Fuck	7	1	20	20	29
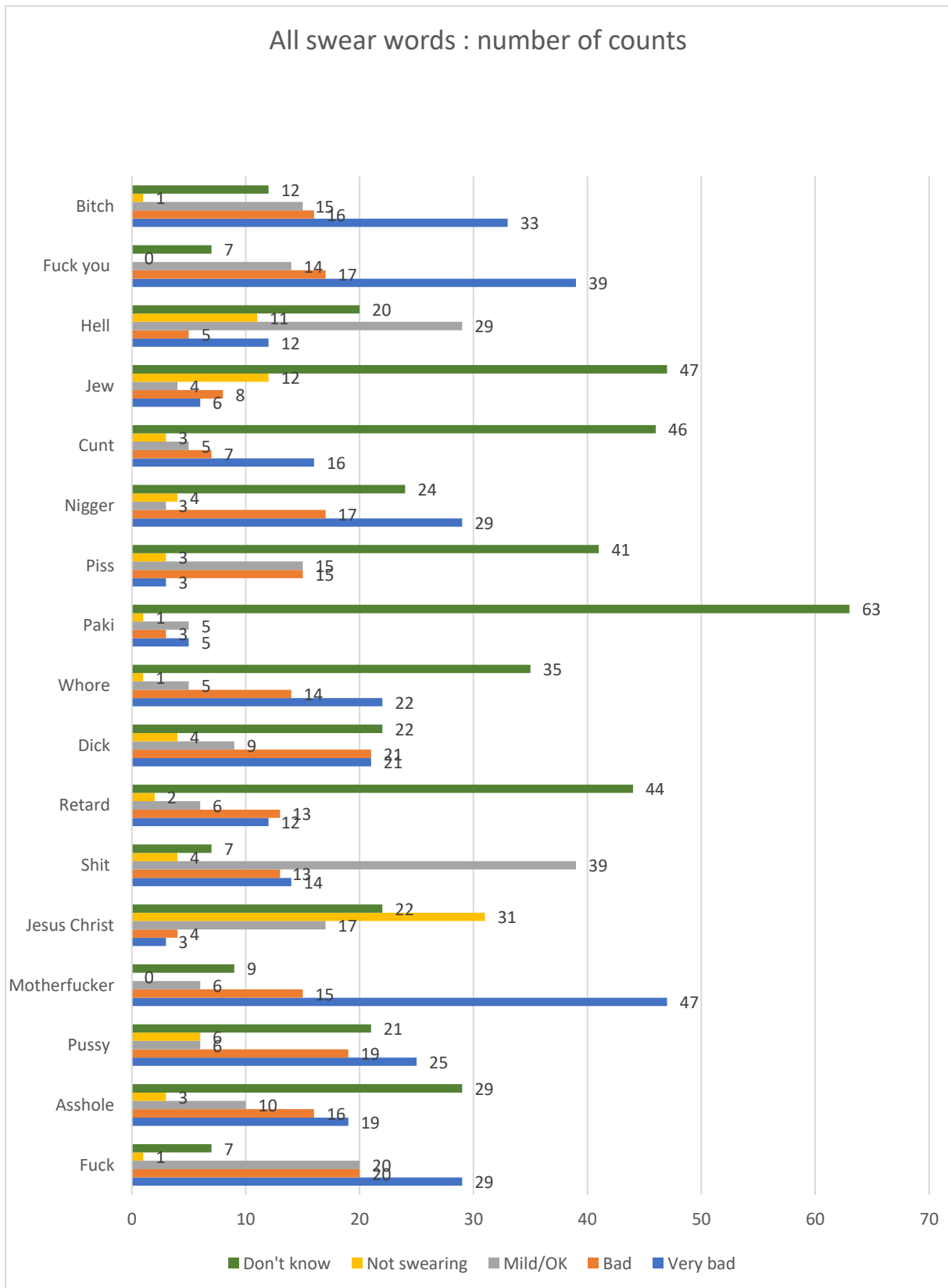
Appendix 3:

Table showing participants ratings for all the included swear words, shown in percentage.

	Very bad	Bad	Mild/OK	Not swearing	Don't know
Fuck	38 %	26 %	26 %	1 %	9 %
Asshole	25 %	21 %	13 %	4 %	38 %
Pussy	32 %	25 %	8 %	8 %	27 %
Motherfucker	61 %	19 %	8 %	0 %	12 %
Jesus Christ	4 %	5 %	22 %	40 %	29 %
Shit	18 %	17 %	51 %	5 %	9 %
Retard	16 %	17 %	8 %	3 %	57 %
Dick	27 %	27 %	12 %	5 %	29 %
Whore	29 %	18 %	6 %	1 %	45 %
Paki	6 %	4 %	6 %	1 %	82 %
Piss	4 %	19 %	19 %	4 %	53 %
Nigger	38 %	22 %	4 %	5 %	31 %
Cunt	21 %	9 %	6 %	4 %	60 %
Jew	8 %	10 %	5 %	16 %	61 %
Hell	16 %	6 %	38 %	14 %	26 %
Fuck you	51 %	22 %	18 %	0 %	9 %
Bitch	43 %	21 %	19 %	1 %	16 %

Relevance for the teaching profession:

The main take away is not the topic per se, instead it is the process behind. Pragmatic acquisition, although problematic, is a vital step in language comprehension and production. Being aware of how words and phrases are acquired at the pragmatic level is crucial for a foreign language teacher, and even more so for a foreign language learner.

Moreover, the topic itself does merit reflection for a language teacher, as they will benefit from staying up to date with what words students are using, their content, and their intent. Students themselves, especially younger language learners, do not possess the ability to fully understand the content of the swear words they use, and in part the teacher is responsible for facilitating reflection on this issue. In addition, for a student to be properly equipped for authentic language interactions in both native and non-native settings, they must have a solid pragmatic understanding of what words and phrases can be used where and when. Swearing also fits into the larger theme of politeness, as understanding both the benefits and pitfalls of swearing can be crucial for a successful interaction. I would even suggest that language teachers explicitly teach how to use swear words, where to avoid them, and the many potential benefits to mastering this craft. Knowing the history of the words, who they are directed towards (in case of abusive searing), and why language users find the words offensive can be decisive for a how a student integrates a swear words into their vocabulary. With the exception of directed abuse, I find swearing largely unproblematic, and do not support the notion that it is an undesirable trait (Babushko & Solovei, 2019, p. 112). Swearing is, has been, and will continue to be integral to how we express our thoughts and feelings, and I would even argue that a pragmatic understanding of swear words, and knowhow as to when they can be deployed, brings the student closer to communicative competence.