

**AN INVESTIGATION OF ESOL TEACHERS' ATTITUDES  
TOWARDS TEACHING ABOUT TABOO ENGLISH IN THE  
SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM**

**BY  
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*For my husband, Jefri and our baby son,  
Zakaria Kenneth.*

*Also for Mum and Dad.*

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

<b>CoP</b>	Community of Practice
<b>ESL</b>	English as a Second Language
<b>ESOL</b>	English to Speakers of Other Languages
<b>L1</b>	First Language
<b>L2</b>	Second Language
<b>SLA</b>	Second Language Acquisition

## **ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP**

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge, it contains no material written by another person, nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the qualification of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement is made in the acknowledgements.”

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## ABSTRACT

Taboo English is an area of inquiry that has been overlooked in the research literature. Little appears to be published on the phenomenon of taboo language and its teaching implications for adult ESL/EFL students learning conversational English.

This study aimed to investigate the attitudes and opinions of 80 ESOL teachers from 10 language schools in Auckland, New Zealand, towards the use of Taboo English in society and their attitudes towards teaching about taboo language to adult learners of conversational English. The project used a questionnaire designed to elicit a combination of both qualitative and quantitative data.

Results showed that Taboo English was a valuable aspect of ESOL teachers' linguistic repertoire and that both males and females used taboo words in complex and diverse ways to communicate ideas quickly and efficiently. One of the key findings of the study contradicted the typical stereotype that females are more conservative in their taboo use than males. Another major theme that emerged was the linguistic prejudice towards teaching about Taboo English in the second language classroom. The vast majority of ESOL teachers in the study displayed little, if any, enthusiasm for teaching about taboo words to adult learners of conversational English despite acknowledging that taboo words are frequently heard in society today.

This study concludes that Taboo language is an undeniable reality of English language use and that ESOL teachers, preparing adult learners to understand everyday language they will be exposed to in the 'real' world, need to address Taboo English to some degree. By not addressing this controversial language, teachers are insufficiently preparing learners to become empowered communicators in English.

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 BACKGROUND

The study in this thesis investigates teachers' attitudes towards teaching about Taboo English in the second language (L2) classroom. In doing so, it has two areas of focus. Firstly, the study investigates Taboo English in everyday conversation. Secondly, the study explores teachers' attitudes towards teaching about Taboo English to adult learners of conversational English. The study also seeks to explore strategies employed by teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) to address this feature of spoken language.

The word 'taboo' has its etymological roots in Polynesian societies and generally refers to something that is socially, culturally or religiously forbidden. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2000: 1322) defines 'taboo' as:

*“a cultural or religious custom that does not allow people to do, use or talk about a particular thing as people find it offensive or embarrassing; and a general agreement not to do something or about something”.*

'Taboo words' are defined as:

*“words that many people consider offensive or shocking, for example because they refer to sex, the body or people's race”*

Certain words in all societies are considered 'taboo'. These special, informal lexemes have “been basic to our linguistic behaviour for as long as we have been competent speakers” (Dumas and Lighter, 1978:16). These taboo words are a valid and essential feature of language reflecting culture and the views of society. It is basically a universal phenomenon that certain parts of the body are more likely to be tabooed than others. In Western society, the most severe taboos are associated with words connected with sex

and sex organs, “closely followed by those connected with excretion and the Christian religion” (Trudgill, 2000:19). The many taboo words heard in society today fall into a number of categories including taboo, obscenity, profanity, blasphemy, vulgarisms, expletives and cursing. While the terms are distinctively different, they can be all gathered under the general umbrella of Taboo English.

Language, like culture, is constantly evolving. As language changes, so do societies’ attitudes towards words considered offensive. The taboo language of even only 50 years ago now seems quite mild compared with modern-day taboo words. Taboo words considered shocking in the past no longer horrify as was illustrated in 1916 by the use of ‘bloody’ in Bernard Shaw’s classical play *Pygmalion*. These days ‘bloody’ is almost considered a common feature of the everyday lexicon. These once frowned upon vernacular forms are now commonly heard in society and are becoming increasingly pervasive on television, at the movies and in everyday informal conversation. However, such language change does not mean a qualitative decline in English but rather demonstrates the vibrant diversity of language.

When speakers use Taboo English, they are activating a verbal repertoire commonly used by their Community of Practice (CoP) to express ideas, emotions and values. A speaker’s use of Taboo English is a demonstration of their linguistic competence as the social function of taboo usage is complex. While some may shake their fist or head, others may use a Taboo English word to vent their anger or frustration. Paradoxically, taboo words may also be used as markers of friendliness in bantering remarks between friends, and may even be used in terms of endearment. Native speakers are aware of the power of taboo words which may be used to show group solidarity and as well as non-member alienation.

Non-native learners will undoubtedly come into contact with Taboo English through exposure to day-to-day conversations, the media and popular music. If understanding taboo words is essential to a complete comprehension of language and culture, then it appears that ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) teachers preparing learners to understand everyday English must address this aspect of language to some degree. However, despite the fact that bad language is widely heard among native speakers, the “swearing component of the lexicon has largely been ignored altogether, even when the students have been adults” (Register, 1996: 44).

In addition, it seems that the majority of pedagogical texts used in second language (L2) classrooms worldwide tend to omit Taboo English. Thus, these L2 texts fail to reflect the reality everyday conversation by not addressing language that is ‘frowned upon’ by some sectors of society. According to Wajnryb (1997:9-10), this would also explain why ESOL textbooks omit topics such as “sex, sexuality or issues of sexual preference”, “period pain or menopause”, “sexually transmitted diseases”, and “miscarriage and abortion.” Crystal and Davy (1975: 3) also point out that often the characters in these textbooks do not lose their tempers, gossip, “or swear (even mildly)...In a word, they are not real. Real people, as everybody knows, do all these things, and it is this which is part of the essence of informal conversation.”

As these textbooks generally omit Taboo English words, they ultimately disempower learners by not providing information about language that is used by speakers in daily conversation. Therefore, there is “little opportunity for students of English to receive information as to the meaning behind, the power of, and the appropriate (and inappropriate) use of such language” (Claire, 1990: 1). By not teaching about Taboo English in the second language classroom, teachers are denying their non-native-speaking students an insight into a critical feature of English. In being ignorant of the power and the implications of the use of taboo forms, these students are less empowered English speakers.

I argue that lessons addressing taboo language will greatly benefit L2 learners who could be described as illiterate in the discourse of Taboo English. However, the aim is not to teach these students to become active users of taboo language, but help them understand what constitutes a swear word and why native speakers choose to use them (Mercury, 1995). Furthermore, how do these students know what words are offensive or what their children can or should not say? By definition, many taboo words are offensive. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to address taboo vocabulary in the L2 classroom which is a safe environment where learners can receive explanations about the complex functional use of taboo words. Adult learners of English should be given classroom opportunities to discuss taboo word protocol.

## 1.2 AIMS OF THE STUDY

The primary aim of this study was to investigate teachers' attitudes towards the use of Taboo English in society today and their attitudes towards teaching about Taboo English in the second language classroom. I also aimed to shed light on whether age and gender influenced whether this linguistic aspect is addressed by teachers in a formal educational environment.

The motivation for this study resulted from my own experiences of teaching about the meaning and use of Taboo English words. Discussions with past and present colleagues about this issue have proved to be controversial. While some colleagues have 'specific swearing lessons', others are of the belief that this aspect of the English language should not be addressed in the second language (L2) classroom.

Furthermore, little appears to be published on the phenomenon of taboo language and its teaching implications for adult students learning conversational English. However, there is an expressed need to explore this area by practitioners and researchers (Fraser, 1981; Register, 1996). In a study investigating ESOL students' understanding, awareness and use of Taboo English, Fraser (1981) and Register (1996) both strongly support research in this area. Although restricting comment to insults in English, Fraser (1981: 435) states that this "aspect of language use (is) totally overlooked in the research literature. It is a significant area, which, if better understood will permit teachers to develop effective materials and recognise where communication disasters can occur." In her paper on Taboo English and non-native speakers of English, Register (1996: 45-49) also makes it clear that this is an area that has been neglected and needs to be explored further as L2 learners could be linguistically disadvantaged when dealing with native speakers who use taboo words as "a matter of course." Jay (1992: 244) also sees the need for research in this area and states, "this common and extensive phenomenon deserves the attention of psychologists, linguists and others interested in language and communication. To ignore it is to be ignorant of the totality of human expression."

L2 learners will undoubtedly come into contact with Taboo English through exposure to day-to-day conversations, and the media and popular music. Therefore, it is necessary for ESOL teachers to address Taboo English in the L2 classroom. I decided to carry out this research due to the varying attitudes displayed by the ESOL teachers towards teaching about taboo words as well as the fact that very little literature exists on this topic. This study will help fill what I perceive as a major gap in the field of teaching English as a second language.

### **1.3 AREA OF INVESTIGATION**

The following areas are investigated in:

- 1) Teachers' attitudes towards Taboo English words in everyday use.
- 2) Male and female use of Taboo English.
- 3) Teachers' attitudes towards the instruction of Taboo English in the second language classroom.
- 4) Techniques currently used for teaching Taboo English in the second language classroom.

### **1.4 THESIS OUTLINE**

**Chapter 2** expands on the introduction and reviews the literature in two main areas: (1) Taboo English in everyday use (2) Taboo English in the second language classroom and its teaching implications for adult learners of conversational English.

**Chapter 3** describes the research approach employed in this study. The methodology that guided this study is also explained and information relating to the participants is identified.

**Chapter 4** reports on the findings investigating ESOL teachers' attitudes towards the use of Taboo English heard in society today and examines why teachers use taboo language.

**Chapter 5** investigates teachers' attitudes towards teaching about these taboo words to second language learners of English and explores strategies employed by teachers in doing so. Both sections argue that there is pedagogical value in teaching Taboo English to adult learners of conversational English.

**Chapter 6** draws together insights from the preceding chapters and provides a summary of the major findings. The implications of the study are discussed under headings related to theory and pedagogy. The limitations of the study are discussed and recommendations for future research are then presented.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 CHAPTER OVERVIEW**

Chapter 2 presents the literature that informed the present study. The literature review has several main areas of focus. Firstly, it demonstrates how taboo words are engraved in our culture and are an intrinsic feature of English language use. This chapter also illustrates that taboo words not only reflect the culture and views of society at large, but also reflect the attitudes and values of individuals and communities of social practice. This chapter identifies the different categories of Taboo English, discusses the growing acceptance of Taboo English in the media and investigates why speakers choose to use this language. It also investigates the commonly held stereotype that women are linguistically conservative and therefore likely to use less Taboo English than men.

The next section of this literature review evaluates the authenticity of language used in ESOL (English speakers of other languages) textbooks designed to teach adult learners how to communicate in English in everyday situations and explores several studies supporting a need to teach about Taboo English in the second language classroom. The chapter concludes by illustrating the importance of L2 learners being aware of the social and linguistic complexities and contradictions that surround Taboo English and argues that L2 learners of English could benefit from lessons that focus on the use and nature of Taboo English words .

##### **2.1.1 The relationship between language and culture**

Language is a carrier of culture and understanding culture is integral to learning and understanding a language. Because language and culture are so inextricably related, it is not possible to understand or appreciate the one without knowledge of the other. (Wardhaugh, 1998). ‘Language’ has been variously defined by both linguists and sociolinguists and as each of their disciplines vary in approaches to the study of

language, they do not always agree on exactly what the scope of the term 'language' covers. Interested in the internal structure to language, the linguist's definition of language focuses on a structural approach of language including phonology, semantics, morphology and syntax. According to Hudson (2000: 2), language, "can be simply defined as a sign system." Thus, a widely accepted linguistic view is that human language is a self-contained sign system of words, sounds and meanings linked to each other in various complex ways by which the members of a speech community co-operate and interact.

However, sociolinguists, such as Holmes (2001), Hymes (1997), Saville-Troike (2003) and Trudgill (2000), who focus on the study of language in relation to society, stress that language is not a purely linguistic entity. Language serves social functions, and linguistic choices depend on social contexts and factors ranging from the participants and the social setting to the aim of the interaction (Holmes, 2001). Despite these different functions of language, both linguists and sociolinguists agree language is a fundamental activity used by a social group for the purpose of communication. Thomas and Waring (1999: 102) explain that 'language' allows speakers to communicate a "particular representation of the world" and it is "primarily through language that cultural values and beliefs are transmitted from one member of a society to another and from one generation to the next." The vocabulary of a language provides a reflection of the culture of the people who speak it. Thus, language and culture are two of the most powerful symbols of social behaviour, both shaping and being shaped by society to construct individual and social identities.

It is clear that there is an intimate link between the concepts of language and culture. Derived from the Latin word 'cultus' (cultivation), and 'colere' (to till), the word *culture* has been defined by Kramsch (1998: 127) as "membership in a **discourse community** that shares a common social space and history, and a common system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, and acting". In other words, cultural patterns are learned behaviours common to a society. According to Carter (1997: 6), culture can be seen as a people's traditions, history, values and language that make up the culture of a group and which contribute to their identity. As language simultaneously reflects and encodes social and cultural patterns, people need a knowledge of culture in order to function in a particular society. In other words, the main use of language is to allow humans to express their social identity, social

competence as well as an understanding of different social situations and this social knowledge is essential for membership in a speech community (Romaine, 2000).

People live in different worlds and societies have varying constructs relevant to language and culture. The learned cultural concept of politeness formulas is a good illustration of how cultures have different definitions of polite behaviour and norms in terms of acceptable degrees of directness and indirectness. What is considered polite in one society may not necessarily be considered polite by another. This view is supported by the research of Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989), Kasper (1990), Scollan and Wong-Scollan, (2001) and Wierzbicka (1990) who argue that the features of politeness do not have the same value across cultures and languages.

While it is accepted that all cultures seek to promote good relations among people, Wierzbicka (1990: 68) points out that “different cultures interpret this goal differently, and they seek to implement it in different ways.” Different cultures place different weight on directness and indirectness. The Chinese culture for example values indirectness and, according to Young (1982), Chinese speakers consider “getting right to the point seems hopelessly rude or foolishly childlike, or is taken to be an indirect way of implying something else” (cited in Tannen, 1985: 211). However, Kasper (1990) states that to members of an Israeli culture, such indirectness is viewed as lacking sincerity on the part of the speaker. Indirectness is also influenced by valued or preferred rhetorical strategies such as inductive (topic-delayed) and deductive (topic first) patterns in discourse. Thus, speakers who use inductive patterns place supporting arguments first and then conclude with main points. In contrast, in the deductive pattern, the topic is introduced at the beginning of the discourse and then the minor points are presented afterwards. While the deductive pattern seems quite natural to westerners, Asian speakers could delay the introduction of a topic depending on factors such as social distance. Scollon and Wong-Scollon (2001: 92) report how Asians feel that “delaying the topic was somehow necessary so that they could get a chance to feel the mood or the position of the other participants.” Those engaging in cross-cultural communication in a multi-cultural environment such as migrants from Beijing working in a factory in Auckland, New Zealand, need to be aware of the cultural difference associated with politeness.

In summary, language is an arbitrary sign system with a linguistic structure and these symbols make human language possible. This system allows humans to express their social identity and social competence as well as an understanding of different social situations. Language is an integral part of culture and visa versa, and as social norms change, language evolves. The following section illustrates how this intrinsic relationship plays a major role in language change.

### **2.1.2 Language is alive and constantly evolving**

The language we use in everyday life is varied and this change is an essential property of language. Changes in language within a speech community reflect linguistic changes as well as changes in a society's beliefs, values and attitudes. Like all languages, English has been changing since the arrival of the Angles and the Saxons to Britain in about AD 500. As a result of phonological, lexical, syntactic and semantic changes, the English language of several centuries ago is unrecognisable to the modern day speaker. We only need to read a text in Old English to appreciate this fact. Trask (1995: 99) states that approximately "60% of the vocabulary of Old English has disappeared, and been replaced by different words" borrowed from other languages. Examples of borrowed words found in the English language include 'tarriff' from Arabic, 'haka' from Maori and 'sarong' from Malay. Languages have changed in the past and will no doubt continue to change in the future and it is possible that the English of today will, to some extent be unintelligible to speakers of English one thousand years from now. Andersson and Trudgill (1990: 190) point out that "as long as language is used, as long as it lives, it will keep on changing."

However, renowned sociolinguist, Janet Holmes (2001) emphasises that linguistic change is not caused by a change in language itself but by speakers and writers when they change the way language is used. Preferring the term, *speaker innovation* to language change, Holmes (2001: 195) explains that, "speakers innovate, sometimes spontaneously, but more often by imitating speakers from other communities. If their innovations are adopted by others and diffuse through their local community and beyond into other communities, then linguistic change is the result." In other words, language change occurs when new words, introduced into the language, spread and

become the norm or standard. One area of vocabulary which illustrates how rapidly language can change is the use of slang words which are constantly being generated and renewed. An example of slang, are the words 'p', 'pure', 'speed', 'meth', 'ice', 'goey' and 'whizz', which are all names for the drug methamphetamine. A further example, includes 'da bomb', 'all gravy', 'bad azz', 'it's smoking', 'da schnit' and 'groovy' which have been used to describe something that is 'really good' and reflect a cultural change in the attitudes of societies.

The acceptance and prohibition of taboo words into the English language is another clear example of how linguistic behaviour reflects shifts in attitudes. Such shifts in social attitudes and lessening inhibitions have greatly influenced Taboo English use in society today. Once frowned upon, these vernacular forms are now commonly heard in society and are becoming increasingly pervasive on television and at the movies. Language, like culture, is constantly evolving. As language changes, so do societies' attitudes towards words considered offensive. For example in the 19th century, one of the strongest taboo words in Maori culture in Aotearoa New Zealand was the use of 'pokokohua' or 'cooked head' - a legacy from the cannibal days. This insult was considered to be highly offensive as it literally meant to cook and eat the head of the most senior person in line in order to gain their 'mana' (power/pride). The taboo language of even only 50 years ago now seems quite mild compared with modern-day taboo words. Taboo words considered shocking in the past no longer horrify as was illustrated in 1916 by the use of 'bloody' in Bernard Shaw's classical play *Pygmalion*. These days 'bloody' is almost considered a common feature of the everyday lexicon. For some sectors of society 'bloody' is the new word for 'very'.

Such language change does not mean a qualitative decline, but rather demonstrates the vibrant diversity of language. Taboo English is commonly used in the vernacular or more colloquial spoken contexts and the following section outlines why Taboo words are unlikely to be used in written discourse.

## **2.2 THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WRITTEN AND SPOKEN LANGUAGE**

Taboo English words are typically used in informal spoken contexts. Informal English is the language spoken by most people everyday whereas formal English is, for the most part, a written language. Taboo English words are not likely to occur in written language as this discourse tends to occur in more formal contexts than spoken language does, for example in parliament and the law, literacy and education, medicine, science and business.

Written language is more lexically dense and generally requires more planning than spoken English. It is more “permanent, more editable and more monologic whereas spoken language is more ephemeral, more dynamic and process-like and inevitably more dialogic” (Carter, 1997: 62). In other words, the written mode yields a more fixed and permanent product, whereas spoken English is a more impermanent mode. Spoken language grammars also have more dynamic, interpersonal and reciprocal functions than written grammars which do not necessarily adhere to the strict rules traditionally expected in written language. Spoken English is generally not pre-planned and topics are developed during a conversation. As Montgomery (1995) points out these topics are unpredictable and often cannot be controlled, and the meaning of an utterance is often supplemented by the context and paralinguistic behaviour such as gesture, facial expression and body posture. Spoken English also tends to be used in more informal contexts and speakers use more informal lexical choices than they do in written English. As Thomas and Wareing (1999: 158) assert, “people don’t talk like books even in the most formal of situations or contexts.”

A major difference between written and spoken English is that spoken discourse has many regional and international dialects or varieties. A dialect can be defined as a variety of the same language with different pronunciation, syntax (grammar) and vocabulary (Romaine, 2000). A good example of regional dialects is a comparison of the pronunciation, intonation and lexical choice of speakers from different English counties. For example, a conversation between two Geordies (speakers from Tyneside in England) could be quite confusing for a speaker from London. The pronunciation and intonation patterns are quite distinctive as is the grammatical usage and some lexical choices. Holmes (2001: 126-127) explains that the double modal ‘might could’

is typical Geordie, as is the vocabulary item 'disjasket', meaning 'worn out' or 'completely ruined'. Similarly, "within the London area, the Cockney dialect is quite distinctive with its glottal stop [ ʔ ] instead of [ t ] in words like 'bitter' and 'butter' and its rhyming slang". For example, 'apples and pears' for 'stairs', 'bread and honey' for 'money', and 'frog an' toad' for 'road'.

English also has many international varieties and there are noticeable pronunciation, intonation, vocabulary and grammatical differences between Malaysian and British English. Word choice is also an interesting difference between the two languages. Consider the Malaysian English phrase, "Why you so like that one?" which means "Why are you behaving in such a disagreeable manner?" in standard English. A further example is the Malaysian English phrase, "Can or can not?" which means "Is that possible?" in standard English. There are also certain words and phrases that are only used in Malaysian English such as 'handphone' to mean 'mobile/cell phone', 'outstation' meaning 'both out of town or even overseas' and 'slipper' meaning 'sandals/jandals/flipflops'.

Dialectal differences can also reflect a speaker's social class. Language can also reveal clues about age, gender, personal beliefs and values. As no two people speak exactly the same (Holmes, 2001), features of pronunciation and sentence structure are very significant in differentiating between individuals and groups. For example, a member of the Mongrel Mob (a gang) in Taumarunui, New Zealand will prefer different linguistic choices to an associate professor of linguistics at a university. Stereotypically, the university lecturer's speech will be associated with more social prestige, wealth and education than the gang member's informal speech which could be considered 'non-standard' by some sectors of society.

The following sections investigate the differences between standard and non-standard written and spoken English and argues that Taboo English use is not specific to standard or non-standard speakers. Rather, the use of Taboo English words is a demonstration of a speaker's linguistic competence.

### **2.2.1 Standard and non-standard written English**

Written English does not have many regional and international dialects or varieties. Instead, one dialect has been accepted as the standardised variety for the purpose of written communication. Therefore, the difference between standard and non-standard English is difficult to define. Written Standard English began to emerge in England in the fifteenth century and the southeast Midlands dialect evolved into the standard dialect. Subsequently, this dialect was also adopted as the standard dialect for spoken English. According to Thomas and Wareing (1999: 163), Standard English is “bound up politically with notions of national identity and it is connected socially with the middle and upper classes and consequently with education, correctness, and prestige.” Therefore, this standard form of English was not determined by some linguistic superiority but rather by social and historical factors such as its use by sections of the mercantile class and by students at Cambridge and Oxford universities (Montgomery, 1995). This dialect became prestigious because it was used by the educated and socially prestigious members of a society.

While local varieties of English have developed around the world, the degree of variation in written standard varieties has not been great. For example, despite differences in pronunciation and accent between British and Malaysian spoken English, orthographically the words are the same. This indicates, therefore, that in the English language, orthography is not a reliable indicator of pronunciation (Chambers, 1998). Despite the oral differences, the words are spelt the same and are, thus, mutually intelligible in the written mode, for example, in newspapers and novels. Regarded as the international language of reading and writing, written English standardises the linguistic norms of spoken English and this dialect of the higher social classes is also the dialect taught to learners of English as a second language. While, it is generally accepted that written English has one standard variety, the following section demonstrates the more complex diversity of spoken English.

### 2.2.2 Standard and non-standard spoken English

Many international varieties of English are being used in the world today. Varieties of English have developed in not only South East Asian countries such as Malaysia and Singapore but also in countries like Australia and New Zealand. However, standard American English and Standard British English are regarded as the two main standard varieties of English. However, it is important to stress, these geographically separated countries have pronunciation, vocabulary and grammatical differences. Common vocabulary differences in American and British English include words such as 'sidewalk versus pavement', 'trunk versus boot', 'gas versus petrol', 'eraser versus rubber' and 'diaper versus nappy'. It is important to point out that taboo words also vary in these two main standard varieties and such linguistic differences are illustrated by the use of the word 'asshole' in American English and 'arsehole' in British English. These examples demonstrate as the geographic boundaries widen, "so generally do the degrees of difference between speakers of the "same" language" Saville-Troike (2003: 68).

Not surprisingly, the many varieties of English are also spoken with different accents. Hudson (1999) defines accents as differences in pronunciation and the English pronunciation spoken in the boarder villages of England, has more in common with the language of the next village than the English pronunciation commonly spoken in Malaysia. While English is spoken with many different accents throughout the world, the English accent, known as Received Pronunciation (RP) is generally considered to be the prestigious form of pronunciation (Romaine, 2000). Even today this south-east Midlands accent is still associated with power, education and wealth and in the United Kingdom is consequently used for the reading of BBC news broadcasts and for the teaching of English as a second language.

However, as previously stated within the English-speaking world, there is an enormous amount of variation in not only the accents used but also the different international, regional and social dialects. These various English patterns used by cultures which are not identical to those of Standard English have been described as 'non-standard' – a term "with the connotation of inferiority carried over to those who speak a dialect" (Wardhaugh, 1998: 25). Those who do not speak 'Standard English' are often considered to be uneducated or even unintelligent. However, it could be argued that

speakers use non-standard English not because they are uneducated but because this is the language employed by their communities of practice. While variations of English have many similarities, they also have many differences; hence there is much difficulty in deciding precisely which construct is 'correct.'

The fundamental role of language is for the purpose of communication and it is clear within each community that a number of different ways of speaking are available to members and these constitute a speaker's *communicative repertoire*. A speaker's communicative repertoire is "related to the social organization of the group, which is likely to reflect differences in age, sex, and social status, as well as differences in the relationship between speakers, their goals of interaction, and the settings in which communication takes place" (Saville-Troike, 2003: 41). For example, the formal language used in the courtroom will be noticeably different to the informal or non-standard language used by a group of teenagers at a New Years' Eve party. Therefore, it is misleading to believe that the use of 'non-standard' English suggests that someone is inferior or deficient in his or her ability to speak standard English but rather that language choice reflects the values and beliefs of a heterogeneous society and is dependent on context and social function.

The following section will demonstrate that Taboo English words are not necessarily 'non-standard' or inferior to formal language but instead serve different purposes when directed to a different audience.

### **2.2.3 Where does Taboo English sit within the standard and non-standard continuum?**

The use of Taboo English is becoming an increasingly socio-linguistic norm of society. Today, Taboo words are used more in more in more in formal contexts such as parliament and the media as well as by speakers of everyday informal conversation. It would appear that colourful words such as 'bugger' and 'shit' are crossing the social boundaries and are now linguistic resources available to speakers of both standard and non-standard English.

It is widely accepted that individuals in a community share criteria for language use such as rules of speaking, attitudes and values as well as socio-cultural understandings with regard to speech (Holmes, 2001). People adopt a communicative style of speaking depending on context. 'Style' ranges from casual to formal and the speaker's stylistic choice depends on factors such as the relationship between participants, social class, sex, age, physical environment and topic (Romaine, 2000). Style may also shift within a conversation for example, as the addressee shifts from employee to employer, mother to daughter or it may shift from being a personal topic to a work-related topic (Saville-Troike, 2003).

Society is complex and each member has a repertoire of social identities and belongs to more than one Community of Practice (CoP) just as s/he participates in a variety of social settings. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1999: 185) define CoP as "a group whose joint engagement in some activity or enterprise is sufficiently intensive to give rise over time to a repertoire of shared practices." In other words, CoPs are groups of people who come together with a shared goal and develop shared practices. A CoP can range from a formal group of academics who share the same or similar beliefs and values to an informal group of boyfriends who share ways of doing things, talking and ways of dressing.

During the course of a lifetime individuals participate in a variety of CoPs and are likely to have different forms of participation in each, engaging in a wide range of activities while negotiating social and interpersonal identities (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1995). Within each CoP, a number of different ways of speaking are available to its members. Competent speakers use a wide range of communicative repertoires depending on various situations and each verbal repertoire has its own set of grammatical, lexical, pragmatic and sociolinguistic rules and norms. The vocabulary and style variation of speech is a very important part of self-constitution.

Vocabulary choice and style of speech are key to the concept of 'belonging' or 'not belonging' to a CoP. According to Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1995: 470), the way people speak "expresses their affiliations with some and their distancing from others, their embrace of certain social practices and their rejection of others – their claim to membership in certain communities and not others." When speakers use Taboo English they are activating a verbal repertoire commonly used by their CoP to express ideas,

emotions and values. Therefore, it could be argued that Taboo English usage transcends sociolinguistic barriers such as region, age, gender, employment and education. For example, words such as ‘shit’, ‘fuck’ and ‘bloody’ are a universal phenomenon.

As Taboo English are words often excluded from ‘polite society’, they are often considered to be a non-standard or even sub-standard forms of the English language. However, the difference between standard and non-standard English has little to do with differences between formal and informal language and Taboo language. This is reiterated by Trudgill (1983: 17) who points out that “standard English has colloquial as well as formal variants, and standard English speakers swear as much as others.” There can be a tendency for people to label those who use taboo words as having a weak grasp of the language and a limited vocabulary. However, this stereotype is an oversimplified generalisation as Taboo English is used by high and low status speakers. A particularly apt example of a high status speaker using Taboo English is illustrated by the following phrase uttered by the vice president of America. Dick Cheney advised a senator to, “Fuck yourself”, during an argument at the White House in June 2004 (Dewar and Milbank, 2004).

Thus, in summary, Taboo English use is not specific to standard or non-standard speakers. When speakers use Taboo English, this choice of expression is part of the speaker’s linguistic competence, and one reason why speakers choose to use Taboo English is to demonstrate a sense of belonging to a particular Community of Practice. As the following section demonstrates these words express values and beliefs considered ‘taboo’ by society in general.

### **2.3 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TABOO WORDS AND CULTURE**

Language and culture have an interrelationship. Linguistic taboos are integrally related to the values and beliefs of society and certain words in all societies are considered ‘taboo’. Taboo words are a valid and essential feature of language reflecting non-linguistic attitudes as well as the culture and views of society. This is echoed by Burgen (1997:19) who states that the quality of Taboo English used in a society is very revealing of cultural attitudes. For example, taboo words such as ‘shit’, ‘fuck’ and

'motherfucker' express concepts very relevant to Western culture. These taboo words reflect part of the Western culture related to *purity* and *cleanliness*.

Taboo language is far from an unambiguous concept. It has an aesthetic dimension relating to ugly and beautiful, a moral dimension relating to good and evil as well as a hygienic dimension relating to clean versus dirty. These concepts are related to each other and are closely tied to the culture we live in. There is an obsession to keep our bodies clean and anything that leaves our body such as faeces, urine, mucus, sweat, menstrual blood, spittle, semen, ear wax and the smells of the body evoke feelings of disgust, filth and shame. In addition, there is also a desire to keep our souls and language clean as "many people want to throw out the filth, the dirt and the blaspheming from their language" (Andersson and Trudgill, 1990: 36).

The cleanliness of the body, soul and language do not exist in isolation and it is not uncommon for members of a society to react in a similar fashion to both uncleanliness and bad language. This is reiterated by Andersson and Trudgill (1990:37) who state people often "react in about the same way to dirt, untidiness, immorality and bad language, with the same faces, frowns and wrinkling up of the nose." Generally, the ideology surrounding taboo language may be related to the basic cultural ideology about purity and cleanliness and the following section illustrates the categories of Taboo English determined by the codes of society.

## **2.4 CATEGORIES OF TABOO LANGUAGE**

The word 'taboo', generally refers to something that is socially, culturally or religiously forbidden. In Western society, people categorise words for sex, sex organs and excrement as taboo. All types of taboo language - obscenities, vulgarisms, curses, expletives, profanities, and so forth are a part of most, if not all languages (Mercury, 1995: 29). Dumas and Lighter (1978:16) add that these special informal lexemes have "been basic to our linguistic behaviour for as long as we have been competent speakers."

What exactly constitutes a Taboo English word is largely determined by the codes of society. There are many categories of taboo language. However, “in the English-speaking world, the most severe taboos are now associated with words connected with sex, closely followed by those connected with excretion and the Christian religion” (Trudgill, 2000:19). Al-Khatib (1995:448) adds that, it “is virtually a universal phenomenon that certain parts of the body are more likely to be tabooed than others.” Therefore, in essence, cursing and swearing is a small set of words orbiting around an even smaller set of taboos surrounding God, family, sex, and some bodily functions ( Burgen, 1997).

Views concerning taboo words reflect the attitudes of a culture or society toward the behaviours and actions of the language users. Behavioural taboos are reflected in the English language and, with time, the actual words used to refer to the taboo subject become taboo themselves. In other words, “first you are forbidden to do something; then you are forbidden to talk about it” (Fromkin, Blair and Collins 1996: 315). The words invented to circumvent taboo swearwords become euphemisms. A euphemism is the use of a less objectionable word or phrase to express an unpleasant or embarrassing meaning (Hudson, 2000). For example, rather than use the taboo adjective ‘fucking’ as in: ‘Not another *fucking* meeting’, a speaker may use the euphemism: ‘Not another *f-ing* or *frigging* meeting’. Swan (1995: 574) also points out that speakers are increasingly using informal taboo words which are felt to be amusingly ‘naughty’ rather than shocking, such as ‘bonk’ instead of ‘fuck’, or ‘willy’ instead of ‘prick’.

It is important to note that there seems to be sexual bias in insults and taboo terms as there are many unfavourable terms to describe women than men (de Klerk, 1992). Insults for women are often harsher and less funny, and the words that many people find most offensive describe women’s sexual organs not men’s. According to Romaine (2000: 112) there are 220 words for females and only 20 words for males. “Some of the more derogatory terms applied to men, such as ‘bastard’ and ‘son of a bitch’ actually degrade women in their roles as mothers.”

The many taboo words heard in society today fall into a number of categories. These categories include taboo or obscenity, profanity, blasphemy, vulgarisms, expletives and cursing. While the terms are distinctively different, Crystal (1995:173) uses the term *swearing* “as a general label for all kinds of ‘foul-mouthed’ language whatever its

purpose.” Crystal defines *swearing* as the strongly emotive use of a taboo word or phrase (1995).

In the following table, Jay (1996) categorises the terms to label offensive language commonly found in everyday conversation. All of these categories can be gathered under the general umbrella of *Taboo English* and in the following section I argue that Taboo English is used more and more frequently in everyday speech and is becoming increasingly common in songs - particularly in the lyrics of popular hip-hop music, and in the media.

*Adapted from:* Jay (1992 and 1996)

<p><b><u>TABOO OR OBSCENITY</u></b>  <i>All obscene language is taboo because these expressions are restricted for public use (television censors etc.) Words such as ‘fuck’ and ‘bitch’ are socially frowned upon and thus taboo.</i></p>	<p><b><u>EXPLETIVES</u></b>  <i>Emotionally charged interjections that are not directed at anyone specifically but are used by speakers to release frustration and emotion. For example, ‘Fuck it!’ and ‘Shit’.</i></p>
<p><b><u>BLASPHEMY</u></b>  <i>The use of deliberate religious terminology to denigrate God and religious institutions, icons and so on. Blasphemers can be ostracised or morally threatened for example, ‘The church can kiss my ass!’ and ‘To hell with what it says in the bible!’</i></p>	<p><b><u>VULGARISMS</u></b>  <i>Crude raw expressions, which are regarded as insensitive, distasteful, and offensive. Vulgarisms are used to devalue the thing or individual referred to or described for example, ‘I have to take a crap’ and ‘snot’.</i></p>
<p><b><u>PROFANITY</u></b>  <i>Profanity refers to expressions using religious terminology in a profane, secular or indifferent manner. There is no intention by the speaker to denigrate God or anything associated with religion. The speaker may be expressing emotional reactions to certain stimulus, for example: ‘God! It’s late’ and ‘For Christ’s sake, get off the phone!’</i></p>	<p><b><u>CURSING</u></b>  <i>Generally, curses are proscribed by the churches and society, and these expressions act like verbal insults where a speaker wishes harm or inflict pain on another e.g. ‘Go to hell!’ However, curses could also be non-religious but still wish to harm the target person. Therefore curses such as ‘I wish you were dead!’ are considered to be powerfully threatening utterances.</i></p>
<p><b><u>INSULTS AND RACIAL SLURS</u></b>  <i>Insults and racial slurs are verbal attacks on other people by denoting the physical, mental or psychological qualities of the victim. These terms are unacceptable forms of discrimination, for example ‘retard’, ‘coconut’, and ‘honkey’.</i></p>	<p><b><u>SLANG</u></b>  <i>Slang is developed by social groups to identify and solidify in-group members. Generally, usage is easily observed among teenagers who constantly generate and renew terms e.g. ‘da bomb’ or ‘its smoking’ for something really good.</i></p>

**Figure 1. Jay’s Definitions Of Terms**

## 2.5 TABOO ENGLISH IN SOCIETY

The creation of a fantasy world where no one swears is non-existent. It is a fact that the 'real world' is one where people use taboo language. Taboo words are prevalent in many English-speaking societies including America, Britain, Australia and New Zealand and it appears that in this day and age they are no longer only used by sailors and prisoners. James O'Connor, founder of the 'Cuss Control Academy' in America, argues that the offensive language heard in society today is a reflection of the deterioration of social standards. O'Connor (2000: 12) laments children's use of taboo language as commonly as "cookies and milk", while teenagers use expletives "as casually as they would say, "Have a nice day."

The claim that taboo words are becoming a sociolinguistic norm are supported by Murray's investigation which was conducted from 1983-1987 into the whys and wherefores of swearing by Midwestern college students in America. His research showed an overwhelming 94% of more than 10,000 respondents admitted to using 'dirty' words regularly. Murray (1995: 148) reports how one respondent commented, "You have to use them in the '80s just to be understood." Findings by Bayard and Krishnayya (2001: 10) investigating the Taboo English usage of five male and six female University of Otago students aged between 21 and 23 years of age, suggests that taboo words are also prevalent in New Zealand society.

Taboo words are heard more and more in both formal and informal contexts and are being used by a wide sector of society. This supports Jay's (2000) argument that it is "linguistic snobbery" to suggest that swearing is a habit of the undereducated and lower classes. Perhaps while some would prefer not to acknowledge the fact, taboo words are a living part of language and frequently heard more and more "at home, on TV, and at the movies" (White and Koorland, 1996:48). Taboo words are becoming increasingly more common in the media as illustrated by Wachal's (2002) investigation of taboo words heard in the media. In a two-hour episode of the series 'The Sopranos', he recorded 100 uses of 'fuck', including two uses of 'motherfucker', and nine uses of '(bull)shit'. Undoubtedly, the language used on television has changed over the years. A study entitled, "What a Difference A Decade Makes" (2000), conducted by the Media Research Centre in America, claims taboo language on network television has increased

dramatically over the years. The study compared 1989 and 1999 and concluded the overall use of taboo language increased over 500% since 1989 (Cited in Wachal, 2002: 196).

Popular culture has also been influential in changing public attitude towards the acceptability of certain words in the English language. While some may consider taboo words to be 'linguistic cancer cells' (Andersson and Trudgill, 1990), they are words commonly employed by the movie directors, singers and songwriters of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. While movies are often peppered with taboo words, hip-hop (rap music) appears to contain far more insidious language. Examples of Taboo English are frequent in the latest hip-hop (rap) lyrics and words such as 'mother-fucker', 'fuck', 'nigger' and 'shit' are common place in songs such as 'Shit Can Happen' and 'Shit On You' by D-12, 'Cock and Squeeze' and 'Fuck Battlin' by D-12 and Bugz, and 'Fuck Off' by Kid Rock and Eminem.

Over time, as attitudes in society shift, so does the acceptance and prohibition of taboo words into Standard English. For example, such frequent use of Taboo words in present-day hip-hop lyrics by song-writers four or five decades ago would have almost been unheard of. It is evident that most taboo words have less shock value than even twenty years ago (Swan, 1995) and words such as 'bloody' and 'bugger' are almost commonplace in standard English. This is reinforced by Register (1996: 44) who notes that the once condemned "damns", "hells", "my Gods" and the like are very common, with the more opprobrious "bitch," "crap," and "pissed" steadily gaining ground."

Today it appears that these more colourful uses of the language are becoming more widespread and more readily accepted into the vernacular. Unlike slang words which are constantly changing, Taboo English words and expressions are extremely stable (Holmes, 2001). There is a strong possibility that these frowned upon words will remain in the language long-term and possibly today's Taboo English will be tomorrow's standard English. The following sections discuss the growing acceptance of Taboo English in different forms of the media and investigates taboo words on British and New Zealand television and international newspapers.

## **2.6 TABOO ENGLISH ON TELEVISION**

### **2.6.1 Taboo English in British broadcasting**

British viewers are hearing more and more Taboo English words on their television screens. A project commissioned by the British Broadcasting Standards Commission in 1999 investigating audience attitudes towards taboo words, found that just over half (54%) of the respondents thought that there was too much swearing and offensive language on television. The sample was based on two separate one-week surveys of programming from the terrestrial (non-satellite) channels as well as one-week's programming from a sample of satellite channels starting at prime-time (17.30 hours through to midnight).

The project found that the use of Taboo English is becoming increasingly pervasive on British terrestrial television. Forty three percent of terrestrial programmes sampled contained 2,887 examples of swearing incidents and this was noted as “the highest number ever recorded by this tracking study” (Broadcasting Standards Commission. Briefing Update No. 7, 2000). The incidents of Taboo English were spread across programme types. Fiction programmes contained the highest percentage of all incidents at 48%, while the number of taboo words in light entertainment rose to 18% and taboo words in factual programming also increased to 17%. The study also analysed the nature of language on television and found that 36% of the words used related to sexual or bodily functions, and that 23% were from a religious origin. As with the terrestrial sample, a significant increase was noted in the number of incidents of Taboo English recorded in the satellite sample in 1999. More than 75% of all programmes contained 2,306 incidents, which represents a 44% increase compared to 1998.

Another report entitled ‘Bad Language – What are the Limits?’ by Andrea Milwood Hargrave (1998), also published by the Broadcasting Standards Commission found that the taboo words ‘motherfucker’ (82%) ‘cunt’ (81%), and ‘fuck’ (75%) were rated by the 753 adult respondents as the top three ‘most severe’ words. Words from a religious origin, such as ‘Jesus Christ’ (46%) and ‘God’ (59%), were not considered to be swear words. The study also revealed that the use of terms involving racist abuse is an area of

increasing concern for British viewers, notably the younger respondents aged 18-34 years. Despite rating Taboo English less severe than the sample as a whole, the trend was reversed for the word 'nigger'. Sixty three percent of the youngest group thought this was either very or fairly severe. Similarly, according to Hargrave (1998), the term 'Paki' also had a higher rating of offensiveness amongst the young.

A further study conducted two years later in 2000 by Hargrave, entitled 'Delete Expletives,' found that the use of taboo language on television remained an issue of concern for the more than 1000 British viewers sampled. The study found that there had been little movement in 1998 in the three words rated as 'most severe' by respondents. 'Cunt' (83%) was rated as the most severe followed by 'motherfucker' (79%) and 'fuck' at 71%. However, this report revealed the term 'nigger' had moved from the eleventh position of most offensive word in 1998 to fifth in 2000. The word 'Paki' had moved from seventeenth position in 1998 to tenth in 2000. These words were also regarded by around 50% to be unacceptable for broadcast on television at any time. While it appears that racial and ethnic words are becoming more powerful, and hence less acceptable in society today, viewers seem to be more tolerant of words considered offensive in the past.

According to Hargrave (1998), 75% percent of the respondents in the British study thought Taboo English was a fact of life and acceptable in certain situations. Both the 1998 and 2000 studies highlight the fact that the way the taboo words are used is of importance. In 2000, Hargrave reports that 73% percent of the respondents said the use of 'strong language' in anger and shock was the most acceptable use while the same number said using taboo words as a matter of habit in ordinary conversation was less acceptable. This data supports the argument that taboo words used in anger are felt to have both greater impact and often to be more justified than taboo language used as part of ordinary conversation. In other words, respondents were prepared to accept psychologically motivated swearing rather than swearing motivated by social factors.

The results of these studies confirm that taboo words are occurring more and more frequently in the media and indicates a growing tolerance of Taboo English use by British society in general. The following section investigates New Zealand viewers' attitudes towards Taboo English in the media and demonstrates that there is also a

change in public attitude towards the acceptability of certain words by members of the New Zealand public.

### **2.6.2 Taboo English in New Zealand broadcasting**

New Zealanders share a broad consensus with British viewers on what is perceived as being acceptable in language for broadcast on television. The results of a 1999 nationwide random survey conducted for the New Zealand Broadcasting Standards Authority interviewing a random sample of 1,000 people aged 15 years and above on offensive language on New Zealand radio and television are in line with the results of the British media studies. The findings which are reported by researchers, Garry Dickinson, Michael Hill and Dr. Wiebe Zwaga in 'Monitoring Community Attitudes In Changing Mediascapes' (2000), provide some very interesting data about Kiwi attitudes towards Taboo English. Like the British viewers, New Zealanders rated 'cunt' at 80% and 'motherfucker' (78%) as the two most offensive and, unacceptable words for broadcast from a list of 22 taboo words. While British viewers rated 'fuck' as the third most offensive word, New Zealanders rated 'nigger' (71.5%) as the third most offensive word. 'Nigger' was rated ahead of 'fuck' (70%) which was considered to be the fourth most unacceptable by the New Zealand population. This result clearly indicates that New Zealanders, like British viewers, are also concerned with racist slurs in the media.

It appears that racial and ethnic words seem to be becoming more unacceptable and offensive and are considered to be taboo within most social contexts. Dictionaries generally define 'nigger' as a derogatory and demeaning reference to African Americans. Speakers generally refrain from using any racial slur in any context as the term generally indicates a racial attack on African Americans. However, it is important to stress that while the majority of both the New Zealand and British population do not accept this word, it can be used without causing offence in certain social contexts.

Sectors of American society can place both negative and positive value on the word 'nigger' or 'nigga' as it is referred to by the American hip-hop generation, depending on factors such as the group membership of those using the term and those to whom it is addressed. According to Saville-Troike (2003: 211), it depends on who uses the word

'nigger' and in what context "it may be highly offensive, affectionate, affiliative, or faddish (following trends in rap and other popular music)." Today, the word 'nigger' is also commonly used to function as a kind of glue maintaining cohesion between the members of a group as well as acting "as a wall between them and outsiders." (Andersson and Trudgill, 1990: 79).

The use of this word is a good example of how language changes and how terms permeate into colloquial language. In fact, author of 'The Hip-Hop Generation', Bakari Kitwana (2002: 115) writes that the usage of 'nigga' is "so extensive and has become such a mainstay within our generation that it is used by many almost as subconsciously as expressions like 'uh'". However, the term 'nigger' is not the only word losing currency with some sectors of society.

While it appears that 'cunt' is the final frontier, 'fuck', on the other hand, is apparently losing shock value in New Zealand society according to the 1999 Colmar Brunton Research survey. This taboo word has moved down the order of words considered to be offensive. Considered the third most offensive word in the 1993 survey, conducted by the New Zealand Broadcasting Standards Authority, it is now rated as the fourth most offensive word. I predict 'fuck' will lose further currency in future surveys. It also appears that 'bugger' is now de rigueur. 'Bugger' is considered to be the least offensive word and appears at the bottom of the list in 22<sup>nd</sup> place with only a small minority of respondents in the 1999 survey objecting to its use. In fact, even less offensive than 'bloody', 'bollocks', and 'crap'. 'Bugger' has become so commonplace that its shock value is almost non-existent. This is no doubt due to its media exposure and public debate.

In New Zealand, the word 'bugger' has changed from being taboo to being a very successful marketing tool (Bell, 2001). First screened in New Zealand in early 1999, 'Toyota Bugger' advertisement became an overnight success due to fact that the sole text of the advertisement repeatedly uses the taboo word 'bugger'. While the advertisement did generate complaints, Bell (2001: 135) explains that these were dismissed "perhaps partly because, as a word, 'bugger' tends to carry slightly humorous overtones which mitigate the complaint or insults that it voices". This once considered taboo word has been given iconic status by the Toyota television advertisement and its acceptance into society is a clear example of how the mass media can influence the

“expression and construction of public opinion and the expression of ideologies” (Van Dijk, 1995:1).

A further example of taboo language being used as an advertising weapon is clearly evident in the Pink Batts ‘Hammer and Paint Tray’ advertisements that have screened on New Zealand television since 2003. The aim of this advertisement was to demonstrate the efficiency of Pink Batts at soundproofing houses from unwanted noise. The advertisement shows contractors building a house and installing Pink Batts into its walls. Viewers watch as several men on the work site hit their thumb with a hammer and step into a tray of paint. In both instances, the actors use taboo words to express their feelings of anger and frustration. The viewer doesn’t actually hear what is being said by the speaker as the words are cleverly bleeped out. However, it is apparent that the speaker is using taboo language rather than innocuous terms such as ‘fudge’ or ‘blast’.

Clearly taboo words are heard more and more on television and the following section discusses how this language is also found in the written media.

## **2.7 TABOO ENGLISH IN NEWSPAPERS**

Unlike television, Taboo English words do not appear as frequently in print as it seems greater attempts are made by editors to censor Taboo English in newspaper articles. According to Trudgill (2000: 19), “Not so long ago, the use in print of words such as fuck and cunt could lead to prosecution and even imprisonment, and they are still not widely used in most newspapers.” Today, few are imprisoned for using taboo language. However, newspaper editors do come under fire by readers who write in to complain about the increasing use of ‘vulgar’ or ‘offensive’ language by journalists and question the appropriacy of taboo language in ‘quality’ papers as well as other forms of media such as television and magazines. One such example, relevant in a New Zealand context, was a letter published by the New Zealand Herald on 10 June 2003.

The letter was written by Lucy Bailey, a migrant from England who expressed her disbelief at the taboo language used by New Zealand society in newspapers, on

television and on the radio. Bailey infers that New Zealanders use taboo words more often than the British and claims some New Zealander's speech habits can be baffling and offensive to new migrants. According to Bailey, taboo words, commonly found in the New Zealand media, would not be tolerated in other parts of the world. She writes, "Elsewhere, this sort of thing is saved for the rags published on a university campus" (pp. A18).

Today, editors generally censor Taboo English by 'bleeping out' words. Taboo words are often replaced by newspapers with dashes in an attempt to disguise the words. However, the general reader usually can quickly fill in rhetorical crossword puzzles like "f \_ \_ \_ you!" This censoring suggests that taboo words are considered too offensive to even write. However, while they are not widely used, they can be found in this genre.

Taboo words in articles published by The New Zealand Herald, demonstrate how Taboo English is penetrating through newspapers into society. No attempt was made to censor words considered highly offensive by the majority of readers in the following articles. An example of Taboo English in a newspaper appeared on the front page of the New Zealand Herald one day after the events of the September 11 terrorist attack in America dominated news worldwide: "We are fucking dying" said by an employee working inside the World Trade Centre on the day of the New York terrorist attack (September 12, 2001). A further example was the use of the taboo word 'bastard' in the headline 'The *Bastard* He Knocked Off' which appeared on the front page of The New Zealand Herald on 29 May 2003. This story was in honour of New Zealand's great Sir Edmund Hillary and Nepal's Tenzing Norgay who became the first ever to reach the top of Mount Everest. The heroic pair conquered Mt. Everest exactly fifty years ago on 29 May 1953. Taboo English also appeared in the 12 June 2003 publication of the New Zealand Herald. The Chief United Nations weapons inspector Hans Blix was reported using the taboo word 'bastard' in a blunt statement criticising the credibility of America's search for weapons of mass destruction in Baghdad, Iraq. Blix stated (B3), "I have my detractors in Washington. There are *bastards* who spread things around, who planted nasty things in the media...."

Another more recent example was the appearance of the two taboo words 'pissed' and 'bullshit' which appeared on the front page of the New Zealand Herald on 15 January 2005. The word 'bullshit' was used by a patron of a bar to vent surprise and annoyance

upon hearing news of the New Zealand “Sale of Liquor Act”, a new law that prohibits intoxicated people on licensed premises. The drinker stated, “This is *bullshit*. If the cops have got a problem with people drinking, there’s a lot better ways of dealing with it. They shouldn’t be marching into bars.”

However, the number of instances of Taboo English in The New Zealand Herald is limited compared to its overseas counterparts. It appears that the editor of the British ‘quality’ Guardian newspaper has a more liberal approach towards printing stories which contain Taboo English. Guardian journalist, Ian Mayes (1998: 1), reports that the words ‘fuck’ or ‘fucking’ appeared at least once in more than 400 pieces published by the Guardian for the period 10 October 1997 to 31 October 1998. In the same period, there were 28 references to ‘cunt’ in the Guardian. Like television and radio media, newspaper editors generally refrain from printing racist slurs. This is reiterated by Richard Dooling when writing for the New York Times in 1996: “Vulgar sexual terms have become acceptable in the last two decades while all manner of racial or ethnic epithets have become unspeakable” (cited in Wachal, 2002: 195).

This section has illustrated the increase in Taboo English in the media. Taboo words are heard more frequently on television and until recent times Taboo words were not often found in print. It is clear that taboo words are prevalent in the media and the following section addresses the question of why speakers use Taboo English.

## **2.8 WHY DO SPEAKERS USE TABOO ENGLISH?**

The use of Taboo English by speakers in society today appears to be more prevalent than ever. These powerful words are wonderfully expressive and roll off the tongue like no other words in the English language. This is reinforced by Johnson (1996:7) who states, “We swear for one reason, and one reason only. It’s the best fucking way to communicate!” However, this is not the sole reason why speakers choose to use this language. In fact, according to Jay (1992), there are psychological, social and linguistic motives for the use of Taboo English.

### 2.8.1 Psychological motives

All linguistic features of English have a function (Lewis and Hill, 1985), and Taboo English is no exception. According to Timothy Jay, author of *‘Why We Curse: A Neuro-Psycho-Social Theory Of Speech’* (2000), Taboo English usage is a normal and essential part of language playing an important role in the communication of emotions. These taboo words can intensify emotions in a way like no other language enabling a speaker to communicate emotions quickly and efficiently in a wide range of situations. Life is full of unexpected events and everyday people get angry or frustrated when unpleasant or unexpected events occur or things in general do not go according to plan. In this situation, most people resort to swearing for an immediate vent of emotion. This is supported by Fromkin and Rodman (1993:303) who state that users of taboo words “often do not know why they are taboo, only that they are, and to some extent, this is why they remain in the language, to give vent to strong emotion.”

A study conducted by Chen (1999) also supports the argument that one of the most conventional uses of taboo language is to express anger or frustration. Surveying the use of taboo language of 97 residents randomly selected from a telephone directory in Southern California, he concluded that the highest frequency of taboo use was when speakers felt angry and frustrated. These findings are in line with a study conducted by Bayard and Krishnayya (2001) examining gender variation in the expletive usage of 11 students from the University of Otago in New Zealand. These researchers also found that speakers frequently used taboo words to express surprise or frustration.

It seems that while some may shake their fist or head, others may use a Taboo English word to vent their anger or frustration. Crystal (1995) also suggests that taboo words may be a factor in reducing stress. This is further supported by Montagu (1967) who claims that using taboo words restores emotional stability because having a ‘good swear’ brings relief to a stressed mind. Both Montagu (1967) and Jay (2000) also contend that Taboo English usage has evolved to replace physical aggression through social organization and keeps members of society from physically fighting each other. Jay (2000) also suggests that these words are not said deliberately but are used more reflexively as this taboo language is stored in a part of the brain that tends to be called upon when a speaker is angry or emotional. He also argues that much of the taboo usage

in society is as much a habit as a primal urge because taboo usage is built into the primitive part of the brain. Experts have reported that the urge to use Taboo English words is so primal that Alzhemiers' patients in nursing homes can remember taboo words long after they have forgotten the names of loved ones (Jay, 2000).

However, not all Taboo English use is unintentional or an avenue to release anger, stress or frustration. People also use taboo words deliberately in social contexts. According to Crystal (1995) social swearing is the most common swearing pattern. However, social motives for swearing differ from psychological motives in that they involve more than one person. Furthermore, social swearing depends on an audience to have any real function. Karjalainen (2002: 26) points out that "swearing in solitude has hardly any social significance."

### **2.8.2 Social motives**

Speakers can also use taboo language to create group solidarity (Daly, Holmes, Newton & Stubbe 2004; Bayard and Krishynna, 2001 and Hay; 1994). Hay's study (1994) examining jocular abuse in mixed-gender group interaction in New Zealand clearly demonstrates that swearing also acts as a way of showing solidarity. She collected data by tape recording sessions of a role-playing group consisting of three female and four male native speakers aged between 20 and 26 years of age. Hay (1994: 52) concludes that jocular abuse offers a strategy to express group membership and solidarity and "those who are most integrated into the group regardless of gender, are the most frequent targets of abuse." A study conducted by Selnow (1985) shows that males used taboo words more frequently than females to signal in-group membership. Similarly, Kuiper (1991) who studied the terms of address between males in a rugby locker room also found that sexual humiliation is used to signal group membership. A study conducted by Pilkington (1992) investigating the different strategies used by men and women when gossiping found that men use abusive language as a means of creating solidarity. Pilkington refers to this use of this aggressive style of speech employed by the males in her study to create solidarity as "mateship culture."

A review of the literature shows that taboo words are also used as markers of friendliness in bantering remarks between friends. This taboo language may even be used in terms of endearment. This is supported by a study conducted by Hughes in 1992 on the use of taboo language by the lower working-class women. Hughes (1992: 299) states, “Children are frequently sworn at, although as noted earlier, not always in an abusive way....friends too are sworn at in both manners and this, I feel, is part of the vernacular bonding used by these women.” A study conducted more than 25 years ago in 1976 by Taylor investigating Australian English, spoken in the Sydney working-class suburb of Balmain during the period from the mid-1940s to mid-1950s, also supports these claims. According to Taylor (1976: 53-54), “if a man greets a friend with the words, “Giddyay, you old bastard”, this is interpreted as ‘we’re such good mates that I can use a word to you that would cause a fight with someone else!” The apparent paradox serves as a sign of group solidarity and is an example of how Taboo English words function as markers of friendliness. Furthermore, these taboo words are so powerful in establishing group membership that the failure to use these words “would indicate a kind of social deviance, a failure to identify with the group.”

### **2.8.3 Linguistic motives**

In addition, it is also important to understand that there are occasions where speakers also refrain from using Taboo English due to linguistic motives. While most taboo words are culturally related, there are clear examples of purely linguistic taboos. In the Tiwi (Aboriginal) culture on the islands just north of Australia, the proper name of a dead person is taboo, as are lexemes with similar pronunciations of the name. Andersson and Trudgill (1990) point out that a similar situation is the preferred use of ‘donkey’, for example, rather than ‘ass’ due to the linguistic similarity of arse (British English) and ass (American).

However, if one takes a purely linguistic stance, the word ‘meeting’, for example, is as good and usable a word as ‘fuck’. Nothing in its lexis characterises this word as being either ‘good’ or ‘bad.’ Instead the connection is purely arbitrary. However, the word ‘fuck’ refers to a concept perceived by society as taboo. It has therefore gained a widened denotative meaning and become a taboo word. However, language is arbitrary

and these words are not intrinsically good or bad. Instead, as Fromkin, Rodman, Collins and Blair, (1996: 424-427) explain, “the filth or beauty of language must be in the ear of the listener, or in the collective ear of society. Furthermore, there is generally no linguistic reason why “the word *vagina* is ‘clean’ whereas ‘cunt’ is ‘dirty’; or why ‘prick’ or ‘cock’ is taboo, but ‘penis’ is acknowledged as referring to part of the male anatomy; or why everyone ‘defecates’, but only vulgar people ‘shit’.”

The use of taboo language is functionally complex. On the one hand it can be used to express anger. Conversely, it can also be used to indicate in-group membership and create solidarity. Therefore, it is very important for L2 learners to know that when Taboo English is used socially without attached negativity, there is a certain understanding between speaker and audience. It is also necessary for learners of English to know that gender of both speaker and listener will influence how, when and where taboo words will be introduced into a conversation. However, gender is perhaps, one of the most complex sociolinguistic restraints surrounding Taboo English use. The primary aim of the following section is to investigate the commonly held stereotype that women are socially and linguistically conservative and therefore likely to use less Taboo English than men. Furthermore, a number of influential studies conducted on gender and Taboo English will also be discussed and highlight a need for further research to be conducted in this area of sociolinguistics.

## **2.9 THE GENDER FACTOR**

### **2.9.1 Traditional patterns of taboo use**

Over the years scholars have reported a number of language differences between the genders and for many years it has been generally accepted that men and women do not speak in exactly the same way. According to Holmes (2001: 151), “Men and women do not speak in exactly the same way as each other in any community” as there are particular features that only occur in the women’s speech or only in men’s speech such as differences in pronunciation, morphology (word shape), expressions of uncertainty

and politeness. It is also generally accepted that in many speech communities across all social groups, women are more status conscious than men and generally use more standard forms of speech. This is reiterated by Romaine (2000:101) who states, “a number of sociolinguistic studies have shown that women, regardless of social characteristics such as class, or age, use more polite standard forms of language than men.”

However, more recent feminist approaches to language and gender research have challenged the perception of ‘women’s language’ (Bucholtz, Liang and Sutton, 1999). The simplistic nature of the dichotomized approach to language and gender research has been highly criticised with many researchers arguing that the gender-language relationship is more complex and context specific than has been supposed. However, while researchers such as Stapleton (2003) caution against the generalised models of gendered speech styles, a review of the literature has shown that the notion of ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ speech is particularly salient in the area of earlier Taboo English research. These traditional patterns of Taboo English use associated with gender have been greatly influenced by a number of researchers. One of the earliest writers on the topic of language differences between the sexes, was Otto Jespersen, who in 1922 wrote that men used more taboo words than women, who in contrast, preferred to avoid this ‘rough’ language. Well-known researcher Robin Lakoff (1975: 10) was also of the belief “that the ‘stronger’ expletives are reserved for men, and the weaker ones for women.”

Even today, some thirty years later, women are still stereotypically regarded as guardians of the language and seen to be more ‘ladylike’ and avoid ‘dirty’ words in particular (de Klerk, 1992: 277). Society’s social and cultural expectations differ regarding male and female taboo use. Taboo English has traditionally been regarded as aggressive and forceful and thus, the language domain of males rather than females. Women’s speech, on the other hand, has generally been perceived as being polite, nurturing and orientated towards the needs and feelings of others. Hughes (1992: 292) suggests that women’s subordinate social status in society is reflected in the taboo language women use and argues that “the idea that women should be ‘ladylike’ in their speech and their behaviour can be seen as functioning as a form of social control.”

This claim is supported by a study conducted by Johnson (1993) investigating gender and differences in the attitudes and beliefs of 87 male and 87 female American

university students towards the use of Taboo English. Johnson (1993: 4) found that women who used taboo words were evaluated more negatively than men and that “a majority of both males and females reported a belief that college women who use taboo language are criticized for being unladylike.” A two thirds majority of both males and females also reported the belief that a double standard exists for taboo language use which assumes that taboo language is for the use of men. However, although the majority of university students believed that taboo language should be equally appropriate for both genders to use, Johnson’s study revealed more traditional patterns of taboo use. The male respondents rated themselves as more frequent users of taboo language than females. Moreover, these males also reported using taboo language in more public places than their female counterparts. This is in line with the findings of a study conducted almost 10 years earlier. Selnow’s study (1985) investigating gender differences of 135 undergraduate students (61 females and 74 males) in perceptions and uses of Taboo English also found that the males in the study were more prolific users of taboo language compared to the females. In addition, the women reported a greater disapproval of taboo use on television and in formal settings compared to the males in the study.

A similar trend is found in a more recent study conducted by Kocoglu (1996), exploring the gender differences in the use of taboo words of 10 male and 10 female university students in Turkey. Kocoglu (1996: 30) concluded that men use ‘strong’ taboo words while females use ‘weaker’ taboo words. Furthermore, “men expect women to use weaker expletives, while women predict men to use strong expletives.”

### **2.9.2 Taboo English and conversational power**

Over the years there have been numerous studies investigating men’s and women’s speech (Coates and Cameron, 1988; Coates, 1986; West and Zimmerman, 1983). These researchers concluded that generally the male conversational style is more aggressive than the female style and in many situations women’s speech is interrupted and silenced by men. However, it is also argued that the use of taboo words reinforces men’s position of strength and masculinity. Selnow (1985: 303) explains that the use of taboo words “may contribute to the establishment of dominant and submissive roles in a relationship,

and in some environments, may furnish a medium through which a hierarchy among interactants is established.” In other words, males use taboo language as a strategy to dominate during mixed-gender interactions. `

However, a number of researchers have challenged the widely held view that taboo words are the domain of males and Coates (1986) suggests that women employed in traditional male dominated professions use taboo words as an assertive strategy in mixed gender conversations. The claim that females are also using taboo language to achieve conversational power is supported by Limbrick’s study (1991) investigating the expletive usage in single versus mixed-gender conversations. His research was based on informal tape-recordings of three male (mean age 25 years) and three female (mean age 27 years) participants from Dunedin, New Zealand. Limbrick found that there was only a slight difference in the total number of taboo words used by women and men when in the company of their own sex. However, analysis of the mixed-gender conversations revealed that women used 83 taboo words compared to only 64 used by males. Limbrick (1991) concluded that this increased use of taboo words by females is a strategy employed to ensure they are not marginalised in mixed-gender conversations.

Moreover, Limbrick’s (1991) analysis of Taboo English use in single versus mixed-gender conversations found that males swore slightly more than females in single-gender conversations. However, there is evidence that men use more offensive words than their female counterparts. Contrary to Lakoff’s theory (1975), the results of this study showed that females not only swore significantly more than males in mixed-sex conversations, but also used far stronger taboo words when interacting with males than previously suggested.

A similar trend is noted in Bayard and Krishnapp’s (2001) study of taboo English use in single versus mixed-gender conversations. Bayard and Krishnappa (2001) also found that females are increasingly breaking rules surrounding the stereotypical male and female Taboo English use. Their study examined gender variation in university students’ Taboo English use through quantitative analysis of actual conversational data. The study found that although females used slightly fewer taboo words than males, there was little gender difference in the strength of the taboo words used. However, like Limbrick, (1991) these researchers found that the males did not use the mildest forms of

taboo words. The study concluded that the use of Taboo English as symbols of both power and solidarity is no longer the exclusive privilege of males.

Murray (1995) also maintains that males and females use the same kinds of taboo words with nearly the same frequency. However, he contends that the differences lie in *when* and *where* the swearing occurs. Generally, males use weaker expletives when in the presence of females and it is expected that both sexes would be less likely to use strong expletives around members of the opposite sex. While males use dirty words indiscriminately, “females tend to increase their dirty-word usage when they’re with only other females” (Murray, 1995:149). This is supported by Wardhaugh (1998: 307) who states, “Women also do not usually employ the profanities and obscenities men use, or, if they do, use them in different circumstances or are judged differently for using them.”

It is evident that the theories about the use of taboo words by males and females are complex. Further investigation is required in the area of Taboo English and single-versus mixed-gender interactions in order to draw any definite conclusions.

### **2.9.3 The influence of the feminist movement and taboo use**

As previously mentioned, an increasing number of studies have challenged the commonly held stereotype that women are more status conscious and use less Taboo English than men. Studies conducted by Risch (1987) and de Klerk (1992) have shown that overall, women are familiar with taboo words and do use these words routinely. Risch’s study (1987) investigating derogatory terms used by 44 female middle class female university students, aged between 18-32, to refer to men question the validity of the assumption that women are socially and linguistically conservative and use less and milder taboo words than males. Her results showed a surprisingly high number of derogatory terms were used by females to refer to males. Risch suggests that the use of taboo words is more appropriately applied to the contrast between public versus private discourse than to that of the speech patterns of women versus the language of men.

A study carried out by de Klerk (1992) with 160 English-speaking South African adolescent informants strongly supports results obtained by Risch (1987) that females “do use derogatory language and appear to be doing so in increasing numbers” (de Klerk, 1992: 278). A later study conducted by Vilalta (2001), based on de Klerk’s study, with eight Spanish speaking university informants looking at taboo Spanish words also confirms de Klerk’s findings. This Spanish study illustrates that taboo words used by young women are not isolated geographically. These results show that females do have a set of “unladylike” taboo words to refer to males and are using them more and more frequently.

A possible explanation for the increased use of taboo language by females appeared in very early research conducted in America. Researchers, Oliver and Rubin (1975) suggested that a women’s knowledge or affiliation with the feminist movement may be a contributing factor towards the use of taboo words. Their study investigated the taboo use of 28 females aged between 40-55 years. Fourteen of the participants were married and 14 were single. These researchers concluded that age was a very important variable in women’s use of taboo language and noted that overall, the younger females had a more liberal approach to using taboo words than their older female counterparts. These researchers surmised that a women’s feeling of liberation would influence their patterns of taboo use and concluded that women who considered themselves to be liberated used taboo words more frequently than those who felt less liberated. In other words, the younger female’s use of taboo language was an overt expression of liberated feelings as a result of the feminist movement.

The findings of a study conducted by Bailey and Timm (1976) also found that age was an important variable in the use of Taboo English. This study investigated the taboo use of 14 women and 15 men. The women ranged in age from 19-56 years, and the men were aged from 19-61. The results showed that the females in the study aged between 31-34 years old reported using more taboo words than both their younger (19-23 years) and older (43-56) female counterparts. In addition, these 31-34 year old females used an average of 12 taboo words, second only to the 28-32 male participants who used an average of 17.7 taboo words. Like Oliver and Rubin (1975), Bailey and Timm (1976: 442) also suggest that this high frequency of Taboo English use by the 31-34 females in the study is “a dramatic reversal of expected (traditional) feminine behaviour which “maybe due to affiliation to or support for the feminist movement.”

A more recent study also supports the claim that the feminist movement has influenced a woman's use of Taboo English. Karyn Stapleton (2003) recently conducted a very noteworthy piece of research investigating gender and taboo use. Cautioning against generalised models of 'gendered' speech style and the ideology that females are more linguistically conservative than males, Stapleton considers Taboo English to be a resource that enables speakers to construct an identity while engaged in a particular 'community'. Her study adopted the communities of practice (CoP) approach to investigate the negotiation of gender identities through the use of taboo words within a specific 'community' context. This concept of communities of practice (CoP) was introduced into the domain of sociolinguistics by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992). The CoP framework maintains an analytic focus on the concrete and contextualised practices through which identities and in this case gender identities are forged and developed (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992, 1995, 1999).

Stapleton's study (2003) sought to address the use of taboo words within a specific community and to investigate swearing as a means of identity production within a CoP. The 'community' was a group of 30 (15 male and 15 female) undergraduate drinking friends aged 22-30 years in Ireland. Stapleton's study differs from other studies in the way that it focused on participants verbalized accounts of what swearing meant for them in the course of their everyday lives. Stapleton found that the use of taboo words formed an integral means of group participation for this CoP. Swearing was a common linguistic practice, with members reporting regular use of language perceived to be very offensive. Of particular interest were the findings detailing words generally considered to be offensive by society. Both male and female members considered terms such as 'shit', 'bollocks', 'shag', 'prick' and 'wanker' to be entirely appropriate linguistic behaviour for the social setting (a pub). The group clearly demonstrated a liberal attitude towards words considered to be offensive by past generations. The acceptance of taboo words is a clear example of how linguistic behaviour reflects shifts in attitudes. The increased use of these terms could result in their eventual loss of currency as taboo words. This is supported by Fine and Johnson (1984:71) who remark that such terms "may be losing their social power as they become more linguistically commonplace."

Stapleton (2003) found that there were no major gender differences in the reasons participants used taboo words. The majority of respondents reported that they used taboo words when they were really angry, tense or stressed out. It is important here to

re-emphasize that the traditional link between swearing and aggression has perpetuated the view that swearing is a male activity. However, as an equal number of females and males in this study used taboo words to vent anger, Stapleton contends that the link between strong language and aggression does not function as a means of gender constitution. This, in turn, implies that taboo use does not constitute masculine speech in any straightforward manner. The most frequently cited reason for taboo use for both genders was a means of humour creation, and as a resource for story-telling. The ability to tell a good story was a defining characteristic of this CoP. It can be said that the students used these taboo words to align themselves with other members of the group to create in-group membership and signal solidarity.

However, a very different picture emerges with regard to taboo words associated with parts of the female body. A gender divide was evident with regard to the perceived offensiveness of the words 'cunt', 'fanny' and 'tits'. Almost all of the female participants unanimously agreed that these words were highly offensive. In contrast, only half of the male respondents considered the 'vaginal' terms to be offensive while none considered the word 'tits' to be offensive. The important point to be made here is that feminist influences, such as "resistance to the objectification/trivialization of women, awareness of sexual aggression, and the need for female solidarity" (Stapleton, 2003:27), are evident in the females' responses about the unacceptability of the use of taboo words associated with parts of the female body. Results demonstrated that the issue of 'sexism' was an important one for the females in this study who generally reported that they avoided these terms as they conveyed derogatory images of women.

Furthermore, results showed that males held the perception that they had greater 'rights' to the use of taboo words than their female counterparts. This perception was underlined when respondents were asked whether they agreed that certain words, particularly those associated with parts of the female body, were more acceptable for men than women. In this instance, a gender divide was again clearly noticeable, with 14 men, compared to only three women agreeing with the statement. In addition, 13 men reported regularly using the taboo word 'cunt' while only 1 female reported regularly using this word. The men in this study viewed 'really' taboo words as a male province. However, this view was not shared by the female participants who rejected any notions of gender differentiation.

Stapleton (2003) concluded that both female and male participants in the study regularly used strong language, in the pursuit of shared group goals. “Participants constituted themselves as members of the particular ‘drinking’ culture in which they are engaged, while simultaneously defining and delineating that membership in various ways” (Stapleton, 2003: 22). In other words, the use of taboo words may be seen as a context-specific mode of self-constitution, the meanings of which emerge from mutual negotiation among community members. Her findings challenge the folklinguistic perception that the weaker taboo words are more the property of women. Instead, she considers the use of taboo words to be a linguistic practice that is reserved for appropriate environments and situations such as a very informal gathering of friends at a pub. Stapleton argues that females use Taboo English words to construct a community-specific version of femininity.

In summary, these studies cast doubt on the general assumption that women are socially and more linguistically conservative than men. There appears to be a definite shift in taboo use. It seems that females are not striving for standard prestigious speech but rather like males, use taboo words for a number of social purposes such as to mark social distance or social solidarity, to assert a person’s identity in a group, to shock, to amuse, to emphasise, to insult or even to bond with friends or signify friendship.

The following sections of the literature review discuss taboo language in the second language classroom and the implications for adult learners of conversational English.

## **2.10 TABOO ENGLISH VOCABULARY IN THE SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM**

Despite the fact that bad language is widely heard among native speakers, the “swearing component of the lexicon has largely been ignored altogether, even when the students have been adults” (Register, 1996: 44). Unlike other lexicon, taboo words are not formally addressed in the ESL/EFL classroom. The omission of Taboo English words is surprising as these words have a central place in culture, and learning vocabulary may be one of the most important aspects for learners learning another language. This is supported by Schmitt and McCarthy (1997: 106) who explain that vocabulary is now

recognised as “the key aspect of learning a language” and is central to the theory and practice of English language learning and teaching.

However, it seems that the majority of pedagogical texts used in second language classrooms (L2) worldwide tend to omit Taboo English. Thus, these L2 texts fail to reflect the reality of real-time conversation by not addressing the ‘taboo’ issue of teaching words that are often ‘frowned upon’ by some sectors of society. In Western culture, taboo words such as ‘shit’, ‘fuck’ and ‘motherfucker’ express concepts related to *purity* and *cleanliness*. The exclusion of Taboo English words in L2 textbooks reflects the cultural obsession to keep body, soul, minds and language clean. According to Wajnryb (1997: 9-10), this would also explain why ESOL/TESOL textbooks used to teach second language learners to omit topics such as “sex, sexuality or issues of sexual preference”, “period pain or menopause”, “sexually transmitted diseases”, and “miscarriage, abortion.”

Textbooks commonly found in second language (L2) classrooms world-wide for example, ‘Headway’, ‘Cutting Edge’, ‘True To Life’ and the ‘Matters’ series, generally do not address Taboo English. As these textbooks generally omit Taboo English words, they ultimately disempower learners by not providing information about these vital words commonly heard in society today. Claire (1990: 1) explains that, therefore, learners are disempowered as there is “little opportunity for students of English to receive information as to the meaning behind, the power of, and the appropriate (and inappropriate) *use* of such language. If understanding Taboo English is essential to a complete comprehension of language and culture, then it appears that writers and publishers of ESOL textbooks should address this important aspect of language in some capacity.

ESOL teachers worldwide endeavour to teach language in the classroom to empower learners to understand everyday conversations they will be exposed to in the ‘real’ world. The ability to communicate effectively in society is highly valued by second language learners. This is emphasised by Nunan (1991: 39), who stresses that, for many language learners, “mastering the art of speaking is the single most important aspect of learning a second language or foreign language.” However, as Wajnryb (1997) comments, the materials that are currently used with L2 learners are not particularly representative of the range of authentic language used in everyday informal situations.

Classroom discourse is a far cry from language used in everyday conversational language. While teachers strive to teach language to empower learners to understand conversations they will be exposed to in the 'real world', Wajnryb (1997: 8) is surprised by "the artificiality of the language of textbooks and of much of the language that was being used to teach English."

Despite the invention of the corpora of spoken English far too many ESOL textbooks use dialogues, which in the past, have been based largely on written samples. McCarthy and Carter (2001: 338) are critical of such scripted dialogues and explain that "there can be little hope for natural spoken output on the part of the language learners if the input is stubbornly rooted in models that owe their origin and shape to the written language". Research by Porter and Roberts (1981) and Slade (1986) (cited in Grant, 1996: 60) has also shown that materials used for teaching conversation to non-native speakers of English "does not generally represent authentic spoken discourse." This view is supported by Crystal and Davy (1975: 3) who also note that characters in textbooks do not lose their tempers, gossip, "or swear (even mildly)...In a word, they are not real. Real people, as everybody knows, do all these things, and it is this which is part of the essence of informal conversation."

In summary, classroom discourse is a far cry from language used in everyday conversational language. ESOL textbooks generally fail to address Taboo English words prevalent in society and in the media. If teachers really want to teach language to empower learners to understand conversations they will be exposed to in the 'real world', they have a responsibility to move beyond what Burns, Joyce and Gollin (1996: 48) refer to as "idealized versions of the language."

While, lessons focussing on Taboo English are generally absent from the second language classroom, this is not to say that it is being ignored by all textbooks or all teachers as the following section illustrates.

## **2.11 TABOO ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS FOR SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM**

Arbury (1996) make an effort to address Taboo English in her textbook 'Discover New Zealand: A Textbook For Speakers Of Other Languages' in a unit titled 'New Zealand English'. Under the heading 'Colloquialisms, Slang and Swearing' students are given the opportunity to complete exercises discussing Taboo English use and compare language used in formal and informal situations.

MacAndrew and Martinez have also addressed the issue of Taboo English in their textbook *TABOOS and ISSUES* (2001). This is a photocopiable resource book for teachers of intermediate L2 learners and above and contains topics which occur daily on television and in newspapers but which seldom appear in teaching materials. The topics range from death, sexual harassment, gay families and abortion to racism and swearing. Each lesson consists of two pages of text, language work, discussion work and activities providing learners an opportunity to talk about issues that happen in real life.

Perhaps the most useful books on Taboo English for L2 learners, however, are 'Dangerous English 2000!' by Claire (2000) and 'Bleep!' written by Burke (1993). Author of 'Dangerous English 2000!', Elizabeth Claire has taught ESOL for 35 years. The concept of a book teaching about Taboo English resulted in an effort to meet the needs of students who approached the author concerning 'taboo' topics. Claire's book provides students with explanations and sample sentences of more than 750 taboo words. Suitable for intermediate to advanced L2 learners, topics covered include, "Is Your Pronunciation Dangerous?" (p.7), "The Social Classes of English Words" (p.14) explaining what words are (in)appropriate in different situations, "Common Words With Dangerous Double Meanings" (p.23), "Religious Taboos" (p.31), "Dangerous English Goes to the Movies", (p.35), "Sexual Harassment: What's That?" (p.48) and "The New Taboo: Politically Incorrect Words" (p.70). It is important to emphasise that this book is 'dangerous' and not suitable for the faint-hearted teacher as it discusses Taboo English frankly. The author recommends this book to be used by adults aged 18 and over in single gender classes.

Author James Ross, has also updated Burke's first edition of 'Bleep! A Guide To Popular American Obscenities' first published in 1993. This updated edition (2003) takes an informative and humorous approach towards Taboo English regularly heard on the street, in movies, on the radio, at work, and in magazines and newspapers. This book includes quizzes, crossword puzzles, and word games to help test the reader's knowledge of taboo use. It also includes a dictionary of 2,500 words, complete with definitions and sample sentences, to demonstrate typical context and use as well as word origins. Both of these self-study designed texts can also be readily used in the second language classroom. Both texts have proven to be popular with learners and as the following studies demonstrate, learners also see a need to learn about Taboo English.

## **2.12 STUDIES SUPPORTING A NEED TO ADDRESS TABOO ENGLISH IN THE SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM**

Research on student reactions to the teaching of Taboo English is limited. However, one of the earliest studies indicating L2 learners see a need to learn about Taboo English was conducted by George in 1994 at an English Language Intensive Course for Overseas Students (ELICOS) centre in Sydney, Australia. This study was conducted by George to primarily investigate L2 learners' non-academic needs and expectations in order for schools to provide quality support services. The main aim of his study was to provide counsellors, administrative staff, marketers and teachers with information about what support services L2 learners expected while studying in Sydney. Fifty eight fulltime L2 learners (48.3% male and 51.7% female) aged from 15 to 36 years completed a questionnaire containing 18 questions.

Students were asked questions such as whether or not they expected their school to help organise alternative accommodation, extend visas, organise social activities and assist learners to enrol at university. L2 learners were also asked if they expected schools to provide information about topics such as where to shop for food in Sydney, Australian cultural taboos/dos and don'ts, further study in Sydney, socialising in Sydney and immigration regulations and procedures. While only 46.6% of the students thought schools should provide information about where to shop for food in Sydney, the largest number (80.7%) expected their ELICOS centre to be a major source of information

about Australian cultural taboos/dos and don'ts. While this research is not directly concerned with student reaction to Taboo English in the L2 classroom, it does suggest that L2 learners see a need to address this issue.

A study more in line with my own is a substantial piece of research conducted by Crooks (1998). This is one of the rare pieces of research done in the field of ESOL teaching, investigating student reaction to formal instruction in Taboo language. Crooks (1998) provides significant discussion about this neglected area of ESOL teaching and his study emphasises the importance of addressing Taboo English for the ultimate benefit of L2 learners. Adopting an Action Research framework, the study was conducted to gauge how a group of ESL students would react to Taboo English classes being conducted as part of their Intensive English Program (IEP). The investigation took place at an English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) centre in Melbourne, Australia. The participants were all Asian L2 learners aged 18 to 36 studying in an upper-intermediate class. The learners were invited to attend four, 90 minute Taboo English classes which were conducted over a three week period. The classes were taught in gender-separated classes by Crooks and a female co-worker. Lessons were based on materials from 'Dangerous English!' (Claire, 1990) and 'Bleep!' (Burke, 1993). As discussed previously, these two texts specialise in teaching about Taboo English for L2 learners. The classes covered topics such as 'Social Classes of Words', 'Physical Matters', 'Sexual Matters', 'Bathroom Matters', 'Racial, Ethnic and Religious Matters', 'Health Matters' and 'Double Meanings'. The L2 learners were asked to submit responses to a series of questions concerning the Taboo English classes and their content. The questions were posed before and after the series of lessons in order to investigate students' opinions about the course and the delivery of topics.

Analysis of Crooks's data revealed that the majority of learners indicated strong support and enthusiasm for the sessions on Taboo English. Crooks (1998) reported that the learners perceived the language and knowledge contained in the sessions to be valuable and interesting. They approved of the manner in which the classes were taught, and endorsed the material used in teaching the language. The results of this study were enlightening. This study supports the argument that L2 learners see Taboo English classes as valuable and useful for both their acquisition of English and their ability to comprehend and take part in everyday conversation with native speakers. In addition,

the results demonstrated that the learners recognized how a knowledge of Taboo English can contribute to their understanding of the host culture and speakers.

The also study indicates that L2 learners are positively motivated towards learning about taboo words as part of their English language course, and that they should be given the opportunity to attend lessons focussing on this area of language. One of the main findings of Crooks's study about Taboo English in the L2 classroom was the need for classes to be voluntary and taught in single-gender classes. The majority of L2 learners stressed the importance of being able to elect whether or not they attend sessions on Taboo English and felt this language was best addressed in single-gender classes.

The results of Crooks's research indicate that there is a need for Taboo English classes to become an established part of the school's curriculum (Crooks, 1998). While academics and practitioners see the value of teaching about Taboo English, Crooks's study provides evidence that L2 learners also consider Taboo English a vital feature. His research also indicates that there is a need for Taboo English classes to become an established part of ELICOS's school curriculum. This supports my overriding argument that L2 learners at least be given the opportunity to attend lessons on Taboo English. The following section highlights why there is a need for teachers to integrate this linguistic feature into their curriculums. This is reinforced by Mercury (1995: 29) who states that there is much for ESL students to learn about Taboo English and that "is useful still if students only learn to understand, for practical reasons, why a speaker would choose to use obscenities and when she or he would choose not to."

## **2.13 A NEED FOR LESSONS THAT FOCUS ON THE USE AND NATURE OF TABOO ENGLISH**

### **2.13.1 Derogatory language**

It is inevitable that second language learners will come into contact with Taboo English whether it be at school or university, at work, on the street or in the media. A knowledge of taboo words not only provides L2 speakers with a critical insight into the culture and views of society but also empowers learners to understand everyday conversations they

will be exposed to in the 'real' world. As Johnson (1996) puts it, taboo words such as 'asshole', 'fuck', 'shit', 'piss' and 'cunt' need to part of the vocabulary of any speaker who wishes to communicate effectively in the English tongue.

Literature shows that obscene words have degrees of offensiveness, depending on how they are used. Swan (1995) emphasises that it can be difficult for foreigners to correctly gauge the strength of taboo words in an unfamiliar society. O'Connor (2000: 12) illustrates the varying strengths of taboo words by explaining, "Oh, what the hell," is not as offensive as telling a person "to go to hell." Therefore, perhaps teachers need to be more concerned about their students' knowledge of and potential use of taboo language. The use of Taboo English words do not have the same 'shock' value in a person's second language as it does in their first (Haynes, 1999) and there is also a danger learners could inadvertently transgress upon linguistic taboos. Saville-Troike (2003: 210) points out that attitudes toward language considered taboo in a speech community are extremely strong and taboo violations "may be sanctioned by imputations of immortality, social ostracism, and even illness or death."

The L2 classroom in Western countries such as New Zealand, typically consists of learners from around the world. Such minority groups in a western country could be the targets of ethnic and racial slurs. Ethnic and racial slurs are words spoken with the intent to demean, denigrate or harm the listener and denote negative characteristics of a target. Jay (1992) stresses that the use of slurs may indicate racial stereotyping or prejudice by the speaker. Common slurs used to speak derogatorily of groups include 'hori', 'honky', 'nazi', 'curry muncher', 'slope', 'chink' and 'wop'. Therefore, discussions of taboo language could be of relevance in the class, as L2 learners may also be the targets of derogatory remarks based on race, creed and culture. In addition, White and Koorland (1996: 49) stress that L2 learners need to be "taught the differences among assaultive cursing, racial insults and slurs, lewd and sexually assaultive insults and slurs, and profanity and epithets."

It is important for teachers to address Taboo English to allow students to defend themselves when such language is being used around them or directed at them. This is echoed by Fraser (1981: 440-441) who emphasises that it is not the role of teachers to "develop effective English insulters" but suggests a knowledge of frequent terms and techniques of insulting in English empowers the ESL student to recognise when they are

“being insulted, or avoiding being an ineffective insulter, or even worse, being an inadvertent one.” Furthermore, as taboo words do not have the same ‘shock value’ in a person’s second language as it does in their first language (Ginori and Scimone, 1995), teachers need to ensure that learners are aware of the potential offensiveness of Taboo words. However, as the following section demonstrates it can be difficult for L2 learners to distinguish the difference between words considered offensive and those perceived to be relatively innocuous by native English speakers.

### **2.13.2 Slang and Taboo English**

L2 learners studying and living in an English-speaking environment also need to be taught the difference between slang and Taboo English. It could be a perplexing problem for L2 learners who may not be aware of this difference and who may place them into one big off-limits category. There are varying opinions regarding the concept of slang words and as a result the term ‘slang’ is rather difficult to define. However, linguists and lexicographers alike generally agree that slang is creative and ever changing colloquial language that is short lived, group related and below the level of stylistically neutral language (Stenstrom, Anderson, & Hasund, 2002). Taboo English differs from slang as it is always associated with some kind of taboo. Andersson and Trudgill (1990:53) define Taboo English as a type of language use in which the expression refers to something that is taboo and/or stigmatised in the culture, should not be interpreted literally, and can be used to express strong emotions and attitudes.”

Register (1996) is one the few researchers who has not overlooked the need to investigate L2 learners’ recognition, understanding, and use of Taboo English and slang words. She conducted an interesting research project at an American university in which 68 male and 88 female L2 learners completed a questionnaire while listening to a short audiotape including 14 taboo words such as ‘shit’, ‘son of a bitch’, ‘hell’, ‘bastard’ and ‘asshole’ as well as 6 informal non-offensive words heard in everyday speech such ‘crap’, ‘whore’ and ‘fart’. Subsequently, the same data was gathered from 86 undergraduate native English speakers. Of the native speaker participants, 27 were male and 59 were female.

All students were asked whether they had:

- heard the word ( i.e. the taboo expression) before
- knew its meaning
- would use it with friends of the same sex or
- the opposite sex
- with strangers of the same sex or
- the opposite sex (Register, 1996:46).

Register (1996) found that there was a similar level of recognition of taboo words amongst the L2 male and female speakers. That is, both genders indicated that they had heard many of the words before and knew that they were taboo. However, men knew the meaning of more of the taboo expressions than did the women. It was also shown that men were more likely to use taboo words, especially with friends of the same gender. These findings support the widely held perception that men use more taboo words than females. However, Register's student attendance records suggested that women were no less curious about taboo words than men, despite using them less often. In other words, "So even though women don't swear as much as men, they evidently want to stay abreast as to how it's done" (Register, 1996: 48).

What is also of interest is that the L2 speakers on the whole reported understanding fewer of the informal non-offensive words than the taboo words. One of the most salient findings is that L2 speakers struggle to discriminate between these taboo words and slang and harmless idioms. Register draws the conclusion that L2 learners reject the use of non-offensive words as they feared they might be taboo, while others report that they try to avoid 'slang' which they consider to be 'not good English'. The results of this study indicate that L2 learners are more aware of what words not to use in the target language than permissible non-offensive expressions. However, questions regarding whether these L2 learners understood the appropriacy or inappropriacy or how they can learn alternative socially accepted forms remain unanswered. Despite this, it is important to stress that Register's study is a great step towards understanding an area that has been overlooked in literature of second language acquisition (SLA), and highlights the need for learners to be aware of the differences between slang and Taboo English.

### 2.13.3 Bilingual taboos

This section illustrates how linguistic taboos can arise from bilingual situations when certain words in other languages phonetically resemble certain Taboo English words. It is important to point out that the information about these linguistic taboos in Thai, Burmese, Dutch, Vietnamese, Turkish and Spanish were provided by native speakers.

Taboo English can be particularly linguistically challenging for L2 learners who face the dilemma of trying to avoid words in their own language which they know sound like taboo words in English. Saville-Troike (2003: 212) explains, “Interlingual taboos occur in multilingual contexts, where an acceptable word in one language sounds like one which is taboo in another.” Mary Haas (1957) gives some examples of purely linguistic taboos among Thai-speakers in an English speaking environment. She describes how Thai learners of English deliberately try to avoid words in their own language that sound phonetically similar to Taboo English words. Thai learners try to avoid words such as ‘phrig’ meaning ‘chilli’ in Thai, as it sounds phonetically similar to the English word prick. Other words include ‘chid’, meaning to be ‘close’, near phonetically similar to ‘shit’ and ‘khan’ meaning ‘to crush or squeeze out’ which sounds very much like the ‘most severe’ English taboo word ‘cunt’.

Other languages also provide examples of linguistic taboos. The Burmese language, for example, provides some very interesting examples. It is important to emphasise that the Burmese language does not have consonant endings although there are syllabic endings with a glottal stop or a nasalised vowel. Therefore, the harmless Burmese word ‘shi’ meaning ‘eight’ could be mistaken for the English word ‘shit’ while the word ‘phuc’ meaning to read, phonetically represents the Taboo English word ‘fuck’. Dutch speakers may also be hesitant to use the Dutch word ‘kont’ in an English-speaking environment. In Dutch the word means ‘bottom’ but in English, it phonetically represents one of society’s most taboo words – ‘cunt’. A further example is the Dutch word ‘dik’ meaning ‘fat’. It sounds very similar to the English word ‘dick’. Thus, the Dutch children’s book with the title ‘Dikkie Dik’, a story about a fat tomcat, is not as taboo as perhaps first imagined. Another Dutch word that has the potential to cause offense in an English speaking community is the use of the word ‘vak’ which sounds similar to one of the

most offensive words in English ‘fuck’. Furthermore, the Dutch word ‘vakje’ which translates as ‘small compartment’ sounds very similar to an English phrase that is typically used as a serious insult – ‘Fuck you!’ A further European example is the Spanish word ‘ass’ meaning ‘champion’. This word could also cause confusion in an English-speaking environment.

However, it is also important for L2 teachers to be aware that the same problem exists in reverse. There are English words that resemble taboo words in other languages. According to Wardhaugh (1990: 230), Thai speakers often find it difficult to say the “English words ‘yet’ and ‘key’ because they sound very much like the Thai words ‘jed’, a vulgar word for ‘to have intercourse’, and ‘khi’ excrement. The English word ‘low’ is also phonetically similar to the Burmese word ‘lou’ meaning ‘fuck’. Other English words that sound similar to Burmese taboo words are ‘cheese’ which sounds similar to the Burmese word ‘chi’, a word for ‘shit’ and ‘phi(n)’ which is also phonetically similar to the English word ‘bum’. Further examples are ‘Finland’ pronounced as ‘pi la’ which literally translates as ‘show bum’ and ‘supper’ which sounds very close the Burmese word ‘sapa(t)’ meaning ‘vagina’. The English word ‘loan’ also sounds very similar to the Vietnamese word ‘lon’ which can sound similar to the English word ‘vagina’.

Turkish speakers also try to avoid the English word ‘peach’ which sounds phonetically similar to ‘pic’ in Turkish meaning ‘son of a bitch’ as well as the harmless English word ‘sick’ which sounds very close to the Turkish word ‘sik’ meaning ‘penis’. Similarly, Dutch speakers often find it difficult to say the English words ‘whip’ because it sounds very much like the Dutch words ‘wippen’, one of the many Dutch words for ‘sexual intercourse’.

Personal names also tend to create one of the most common problems in the area of linguistic taboos. Names in one language may appear to be taboo words in another linguistic community. The name Leigh/Lee, both a first and family name, sounds like the Burmese word ‘li’ meaning ‘penis’. Several Vietnamese names also sound like taboo words in English. An example is the Vietnamese popular male first name ‘Phuc’ and ‘Phat’, common first names in Vietnamese. ‘Phuc’ is pronounced the same as the English taboo word ‘fuck’ while ‘Phat’ sounds like ‘fart’ in English. A further example is the male Vietnamese first name, ‘Bich’, phonetically similar to the Taboo English word ‘bitch’. According to Saville-Troike (2003: 213), English speaking professors are

unwilling or embarrassed to call on students with names that sound similar to taboo words in English. She explains how the name 'Jesus' is "often rechristened 'Jesse' by the second week of class."

L2 teachers need to address these pronunciation issues in the classroom. It would be of great value to construct a dictionary of English words that are similar to taboo words in other languages. Saville-Troike believes (2003:212), this "would undoubtedly explain some resistant pronunciation "problems" in English as a foreign language classes."

## **2.14 SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPETENCE**

Native speakers use Taboo English according to the situation and this use of taboo words is an extension of their sociolinguistic competence and in order for L2 learners to become literate in the discourse of Taboo English they also need an awareness of the sociolinguistic restrictions relevant to Taboo English use. These sociocultural variables that govern the use of taboo language require detailed explanation. Native English speakers are usually aware of the social restrictions in certain situations and tend to select their opportunities for Taboo English use cautiously. Speakers use discretion as what might be perceived as a taboo word or phrase in one group might be considered innocent or innocuous by another depending on the values of the particular group. The sanctions of taboo use may be explicitly obvious as in Parliament, in a court of law or during a job interview. However, for the L2 learner of English the prohibition of explicit and implicit forms of Taboo English may be far from obvious. Crystal (1995: 173) points out that the use of taboo language "is a tacit understanding between people, which occasionally becomes explicit in the form of a comment, correction or sanction (such as parental rebuke)."

Language learners could be informed that the status of a speaker is a vital variable restricting the use of Taboo English. According to Mercury (1995: 32) "successful swearers swear among friends where social status is not a primary worry, and friends normally accept such behaviour." This is further demonstrated by the results of Murray's study (1995: 145). While 94% of the participants admitted to using dirty

language regularly, 93% of the males and 98% of the females claimed that they would never use a dirty word in front of a parent or grandparent. Males (81%) and females (97%) also claimed they would never use taboo words in front of a member of the clergy. The almost unwritten code of refraining from using taboo words in the presence of parents and priests, is again evident in the results of a study conducted by Hughes (1992) investigating the working class women's (WC) speech in Orsdall, Salford, in Britain. While more than half of the six respondents reported using taboo words often during a conversation with their social workers, friends and children, all of the 6 women reported that they would never use taboo words at or in front of their parents.

According to Hughes (1992:299) all of the women thought it was disrespectful to use Taboo English at or in front of their parents and "this seems to be the only real area where respect was shown concerning swearing." Findings from a study conducted by Fagersten (2000: 177) also provide a similar trend towards the attitudes of taboo use in the presence of authority figures. While the participants in the study reported their own taboo use as 'normal', the majority of participants "also reported an intolerance for the use of swear words by young children, religious enthusiasts, professionals and authority figures such as politicians and parents."

Of equal importance is the need for learners to be aware of the complicated linguistic functions surrounding taboo use. These colourful words can be used to intensify adjectives and nouns, to express jocular insults, to express surprise or express anger or frustration. The following entry diary of a post-intermediate learner (2001) illustrates the complexities and contradictions of taboo language and the confusion faced by learners with little knowledge of the social variables that govern its use:

*"I always saw some words in the sentence that I didn't understand the meaning. I only knew the speaker was very angry.... I know those words not only can be used to show surprise and so on. In some situations, those words even can be used between very good friends and relations to show gentleness."*

Clearly the functional use of Taboo English is complex and for second language learners (L2) of English, particularly newcomers to an English-speaking country, using these words appropriately is fraught with danger. This is stressed by Swan (1995: 574) who explains that it is not easy for L2 students to "know the exact strength of these

expressions in a foreign language, or to know what kind of people are shocked by them, and in what circumstances. One may easily say something that is meant as a joke, but which seriously upsets the people one is talking to.”

One word that has the potential to create confusion is the semantically versatile taboo word ‘fuck’. This word can be used to express anger and surprise and is also used by speakers to create solidarity. The complexities of this word will be discussed in the following section.

## **2.15 ‘FUCK’ AS A SOLIDARITY MARKER**

L2 learners need to know that the taboo word ‘fuck’ is one of the most versatile taboo words in the English language and has a wide range of meanings and uses. According to Andersson and Trudgill (1992) ‘fuck’ is “one of most interesting and colourful words in the English language today that can be used to describe pain, pleasure, hatred and even love Jay (1996: 15) adds that ‘fuck’ is “one of the most frequently recorded words in public” especially when used as an expletive to express an outburst of anger. However, it is important for learners to know that the impact of ‘fuck’ as an offensive word is diminishing at a rapid rate.

The versatility of ‘fuck’ is well illustrated in a study by Kidman (1993) investigating swear words commonly used in Australian English. Kidman’s examples of speech acts using ‘fuck’ clearly demonstrate the complex functional use of this commonly heard taboo word. A more recent study conducted by McEnery and Xiao (2004) investigated the use of ‘fuck’ and its variants in modern British English using the British National Corpus (BNC), found that ‘fuck’ “was a typical swear-word that occurs frequently in the BNC.” The study concluded that ‘fucking’ was the most commonly employed variant of ‘fuck’. The widespread use of ‘fuck’ in modern English is further confirmed by the results of a study conducted in New Zealand by Bayard and Krishnayya (2001: 10) examining gender variation in the expletive usage of 11 students from the University of Otago in New Zealand. These researchers also concluded that ‘fuck’ and its derivatives were the “expletive of choice for both genders” in New Zealand.

A review of the literature also indicates that the conventional functions of 'fuck' serve as an expression of exasperation, an insult and an intensifier. However, it is important for learners to know that 'fuck' can also be used to show group solidarity. It is vital that learners are aware that native speakers not only employ 'fuck' to express negative feelings but also use this word as a positive strategy to mark emphasis and express solidarity (Bayard and Krishynna, 2001). This is further supported by a more recent study conducted by Holmes et al. (2004) investigating the socio-pragmatic functions of the taboo word 'fuck' and its variants in a New Zealand context. The study was based on recorded authentic spoken data of workers in a New Zealand soap factory. The researchers found that 'fuck' was extensively employed to signal in-group solidarity within a particular Community of Practice. Daly et al. (2004, 954) explains, "These men are on such good terms that they can swear at each other, not only with impunity, but with positive affect. Forms of 'fuck' appear to act as markers of solidarity and positive politeness for members of this community of practice."

Therefore, it could be argued that the use of Taboo English words contradict Brown and Levinson's politeness theory as telling someone to 'fuck off' or 'fuck up' are clear examples of face threatening speech acts. But, in the case of Taboo English use, such face threatening acts (FTA) are not always necessarily regarded as a feature of impoliteness as they can be used as a means of promoting good relations among speakers. Koenraad Kuiper (1991) refers to this type of politeness phenomena as "the dark side of politeness." For example, telling a workmate to 'fuck off' or 'fuck up' in a jocular manner could serve to create solidarity. Such use of a taboo word by an employee could even be interpreted by an employer as a friendly gesture or even a sign of respect. Andersson and Trudgill (1990; 71-72) explain, "This may sound paradoxical, but the truth is that the language used between equals or near-equals (some people will always be more equal than others) tends to be less formal. So, when your boss swears with you, you have advanced in the company. When he swears at you, it is the other way round."

However, when there are significant cultural differences regarding politeness and taboo use, misinterpretations can arise as what is appropriate for a situation in one culture may be appropriate in another. The following excerpt of an e-mail written by an adult Chinese migrant L2 learner about his work experience in a New Zealand company demonstrates the frustration and misunderstanding that can result when two speakers

have very different socio-cultural conventions about taboo language in the workplace. Ill feeling arises by failure of the student to recognize that on the factory floor people have different norms and expectations concerning when and how Taboo English is acceptable in use. What is regarded as impolite use of a taboo word for this migrant worker is not regarded as impolite by the New Zealand employee.

22 August 2001

*“I am writing to report to you my work experience at ABC Company.*

*X told you that he does not want me to work there any more, it is really a good news for both of me and him. The only whole sentence I heard from his month is “what kind of work experience would you like”, actually, the words from his month were not so polite, and this was the only tone without “FUCK”.*

In this situation the learner did not understand the generally informal culture that governs behaviour on the factory floor. It seems that the Chinese migrant is offended and has no doubt suffered a major loss of face. This is a clear example of why teachers need to address Taboo English in courses such as Employment English which focus on preparing L2 speakers with the sociopragmatic knowledge needed to successfully communicate in an English speaking workplace. Such Taboo English lessons would empower L2 learners and allow them to be better prepared to deal with situations where native speakers use Taboo English. Teachers need to address such cross-cultural situations because what is appropriate for a situation in one culture may not be appropriate in another. Discussion of learners’ native experiences and comparisons could provide a valuable cross-cultural perspective. Globalisation ensures mounting inter-cultural communication throughout the world. If one is aware of the different cultural values and assumptions concerning face, politeness and taboo words, serious social and interpersonal problems can be resolved, prevented or alleviated during inter-cultural communication

In summary, learners need to study the illocutionary force and the perlocutionary effects of locutionary acts in order to gain a true insight into the complicated aspects of Taboo English usage. L2 learners need to know that Taboo English use is contextually relevant. Understanding Taboo English is equally vital to a complete comprehension of language and culture as it is an integral part of popular culture. Language is alive and

speakers choose different kinds of taboo words and put them together in different kinds of ways according to situation or context. However, this choice of taboo language will depend on the relationship between speaker and addressee, the circumstances of the conversation as well as the intended effect, as well as the social background of the speaker (Holmes, 2001). L2 learners need to understand the influence of social factors on speech behaviour and know the complex sociolinguistic rules for speaking in a community. These learners need ‘sociolinguistic competence’ to communicate in an English speaking society effectively. Holmes (2001 :366-367) defines the notion of ‘sociolinguistic competence’ as “the knowledge which underlies people’s ability to use language appropriately.” In other words when speakers use Taboo English, they are activating their social and their linguistic repertoires. However, unlike native speakers very few L2 speakers are aware of the subtleties that underlie the complicated functions of Taboo English usage. In order for L2 learners to become literate in the discourse of Taboo English, they need an awareness of the sociolinguistic restrictions relevant to its use and understand that power is embedded in the language that people use when using Taboo English.

While the sociolinguistic restrictions relevant to the use of Taboo English are complex, the following section illustrates that the grammar and linguistic features of Taboo English are not overly complicated.

## **2.16 THE GRAMMAR OF TABOO ENGLISH**

The actual grammar surrounding Taboo English is not overly complicated. Furthermore, Johnson (1996: 44) adds that, “Originality is not essential to effective swearing. Nor is a wide vocabulary necessary.” The following tables illustrate the grammar and function of taboo language including the Taboo English word ‘fuck’.

Adapted From: (Andersson and Trudgill, 1990:63).

<p>1. <u>As separate utterances</u> (expletives and abusives):</p> <p><b><i>Shit! Jesus Christ! You Bastard!</i></b></p>
<p>2. <u>As ‘adsentences’</u> (loosely tied to a sentence, before or after):</p> <p><b><i>Shit! I forgot all about that.</i></b> <b><i>You have to tell me, for God’s sake!</i></b></p>
<p>3. <u>As major constituents of a sentence</u> (Subject, verb, adverb etc.):</p> <p><b><i>That stupid bastard came to see me.</i></b> <b><i>He fucks up everything.</i></b> <b><i>He managed – God damn it – to get his degree.</i></b></p>
<p>4. <u>As part of a constituent of a sentence</u> (adjective, adverb:)</p> <p><b><i>This fucking train is always late!</i></b> <b><i>He’s got a bloody big mouth.</i></b></p>
<p>5. <u>As part of a word</u> (compound or derivational, as prefix, suffix or infix):</p> <p><b><i>That’s abso-bloody-lutely wonderful news.</i></b> <b><i>That’s a fan-fucking-tastic job.</i></b></p>

**Figure 2. The Grammar Of Taboo English Use**

Adapted From: (Andersson and Trudgill, 1990:53).

<p><b><u>Expletive</u></b></p> <p>Used to express emotions of surprise, anger, annoyance, frustration etc.</p> <p>These taboo words are not directed towards others.</p> <p><b>Examples: <i>God! Hell! Fuck! Shit!</i></b>          ‘God’ is a common reaction to startling or shocking information. <i>Christ Almighty</i> is the strongest expression and it is important for L2 learners that this word may be offensive to Christian listeners.</p> <p>‘Shit’ is not meant in a literal sense.</p>	<p><b><u>Humorous</u></b></p> <p>L2 learners need to know that Taboo English words are not always abusive or aggressive but can also be playful and humorous.</p> <p>These taboo words are directed towards others but are not derogatory.</p> <p>They often take the form of abusive language but have the opposite function and are playful rather than offensive.</p> <p><b>Examples: <i>Get your ass in gear! You stupid bastard!</i></b></p>
<p><b><u>Abusive</u></b></p> <p>Directed towards others, derogatory, includes name-calling and different types of ethnic and racial slurs.</p> <p><b>Examples: <i>You asshole! You bastard! Go to hell! You nigger!</i></b></p>	<p><b><u>Auxiliary</u></b></p> <p>These taboo words are not directed towards a person or situation.</p> <p>Often or always non-emphatic.</p> <p><b>Examples: <i>This fucking car! Bloody meeting!</i></b></p>

**Figure 3. The Linguistic Features Of Taboo English Use**

An <b><u>intransitive</u></b> verb.	Jefri <i>fucked</i> Mary.
An <b><u>intransitive</u></b> verb.	Jefri <i>fucks</i> .
An <b><u>adjective</u></b> .	It's so <i>fucking</i> cold.
As part of an <b><u>adverb</u></b> .	Jefri eats too <i>fucking</i> much.
As an <b><u>adverb</u></b> intensifying an adjective.	Jefri is <i>fucking</i> handsome.
As a <b><u>noun</u></b> .	Jefri doesn't give a <i>fuck</i> .
As an <b><u>inflex</u></b> (part of a word).	That's <i>abso-fucking-lutely</i> wonderful!

**Figure 4. The Grammar Of 'Fuck'**

<p><b><u>Greetings</u></b> How the <i>fuck</i> are you?</p>	<p><b><u>Difficulty</u></b> I don't understand the <i>fucking</i> question.</p>
<p><b><u>Fraud</u></b> I got <i>fucked</i> by the car dealer.</p>	<p><b><u>Despair</u></b> <i>Fucked</i> again.</p>
<p><b><u>Dismay</u></b> Oh, <i>fuck</i> it!</p>	<p><b><u>Incompetence</u></b> He <i>fucks</i> up everything.</p>
<p><b><u>Trouble</u></b> Well, I guess I'm <i>fucked</i> now.</p>	<p><b><u>Displeasure</u></b> What the <i>fuck</i> is going on here?</p>
<p><b><u>Aggression</u></b> <i>Fuck</i> you!</p>	<p><b><u>Lost</u></b> Where the <i>fuck</i> are we?</p>
<p><b><u>Disgust</u></b> <i>Fuck</i> me.</p>	<p><b><u>Disbelief</u></b> <i>Unfucking</i> believable.</p>
<p><b><u>Confusion</u></b> What the <i>fuck</i>?</p>	<p><b><u>Retaliation</u></b> Up your <i>fucking</i> ass.</p>

**Figure 5. The Functions Of 'Fuck'**

## 2.17 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter has reviewed the literature in two areas: Taboo English in society and in the second language classroom. While some may consider taboo words to be ‘linguistic cancer cells’ (Andersson and Trudgill, 1990), these are the words commonly employed by the movie directors, singers and songwriters of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. It has been shown that Taboo English use is not confined to standard or non-standard speakers. Instead, when speakers use Taboo English, this choice of expression is part of the speaker’s linguistic competence, and one reason speakers choose to use Taboo English is to create a sense of belonging to a particular Community of Practice. The review also suggested that the use of Taboo English as symbols of both power and solidarity is no longer the exclusive privilege of males.

I argued that adult learners of conversational English need ‘sociolinguistic competence’ to communicate in an English speaking society effectively and that L2 learners need to know what actually constitutes a taboo word, and be able to recognise the appropriate and inappropriate vocabulary for the situation, as well as recognise offensive, discriminatory and threatening language. I propose that these learners can benefit from Taboo English lessons as it is important for students who are learning conversational English to understand what is acceptable or unacceptable in taboo language behaviour if only for practical reasons. By not addressing this controversial language, I suggest that teachers are insufficiently preparing learners to become empowered communicators in English.

If it is taken that this linguistic area is a core element of English and understanding taboo words is necessary to fully comprehend the host culture, then it is clear that ESOL teachers preparing adult learners to understand the target language must address Taboo English in some capacity. However, a review of the literature has also revealed that little appears to have been done on Taboo English and its teaching implications in the L2 classroom. Studies investigating ESOL teachers’ attitudes towards teaching about Taboo English in the L2 classroom are scarce. Therefore, I decided to conduct a study to help fill what I perceived to be a gap in the literature. This research project will attempt to investigate the attitudes of 80 ESOL teachers from 10 Auckland language schools to Taboo English in society and their attitudes to teaching about taboo words to

adult learners of conversational English. The following questions will attempt to fill this gap in ESOL research.

## **2.18 THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The following questions underpin and guide this study. For each of the following research questions, the study will compare the findings for each gender. Furthermore, the findings for two different age groups (25-35 and 45+) will also be compared.

- What are teachers' attitudes towards the use of taboo words heard in society?
- Do females use taboo words less frequently than males?
- Do teachers use taboo words outside the classroom, and if so, what is the function of their use?
- What are teachers' attitudes towards teaching about Taboo English in the L2 classroom?
- What taboo words in English do teachers consider important and not important and therefore teach in the L2 classroom?
- When do teachers teach about Taboo English in the L2 classroom?
- How do teachers teach about Taboo English in the L2 classroom?

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 RESEARCH PARADIGM**

Framed in a predominantly interpretive paradigm (Gephart, 1999), the intention of this study was to investigate teachers' attitudes and opinions to teaching about Taboo English in the second language (L2) classroom. In doing so, the study had two areas of focus. Firstly, it investigated Taboo English in everyday conversation. Secondly, the study explored teachers' attitudes towards teaching about Taboo English to adult learners of conversational English. The study also sought to explore strategies employed by teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) to address this feature of spoken language.

#### **3.2 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

The study was devised to gather statistical information as well as qualitative data and an interpretive approach was selected using a comprehensive questionnaire (Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991). The questionnaire consisted of a mixture of closed and open questions. The closed questions included ranking and frequency response questions. These closed questions used Likert-type 2-point to 5-point scales. Clearly, the use of the varying scales is a call on part of the researcher as to how finely respondents are expected to distinguish between the different categories (Block 1998). I considered it meaningful to use two-point scales for particular questions while it was more appropriate to use a finer five-point scale for other questions to best elicit information. Each of the closed questions provided participants with the opportunity to add qualitative comments about their choice of answers. It was hoped that these qualitative comments would provide valuable information that could not be captured by the closed-ended categories. The questionnaire also contained questions that were entirely open. These open questions were included to seek qualitative data in order to identify the attitudes and opinions of participants. According to Guba and Lincoln (1994) this

combination of quantitative and qualitative methods can be effectively used in the same research project as each method has a particular strength to provide illuminating insights and identify common themes and patterns.

Questionnaires can be useful in collecting factual and attitudinal data (Dornyei, 2003). However, there are both advantages and disadvantages to their use. It was thought that a questionnaire would be the best data collection method, given the taboo nature of the topic being investigated. This view is supported by Marshall and Rossman (1999) who state that questionnaires are commonly used to collect information about sensitive or controversial topics within the public domain. This study aimed to elicit information about Taboo English, language that some participants could have felt apprehensive or even embarrassed about using in a face-to-face interview. A further advantage of using self-completed questionnaires is the fact that large-scale samples can be surveyed (Simmons, 2001). Another advantage is that questionnaires are also easy to administer and serve the purpose of easily gaining large amounts of data (Neuman, 2000).

However, the use of a questionnaire as a method of data collection has its disadvantages. The biggest single disadvantage is that a questionnaire tells you only the participants' reaction as the participant perceives the situation at a particular point in time. In other words, a questionnaire totally relies on the honesty and accuracy of participant responses and it can not be assumed that a participant's perspectives can be measured totally accurately through self-report (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). In addition, it is also difficult to avoid bias when constructing the questions in a questionnaire. Bias can be a particular problem when a respondent has to react to very tightly focussed closed questions. When a respondent has to react to a more loose set of open questions, bias is still there, but it's most probably more deeply hidden (Nunan, 1992).

It is important to point out that this questionnaire was pilot tested on a smaller scale in 2001 as part of a coursework research project. Participants were asked for feedback regarding difficulties they encountered completing the questionnaire. As a result of this pilot study, the questionnaire was amended and changes were made to improve its reliability and validity. Questions were re-worded using simple and concise language that could be easily understood by participants. After the analysis of the results of this

pilot study, a number of questions were also added to the questionnaire used in the present study.

A further disadvantage of using questionnaires is that participant answers may be illegible, difficult to understand or incomplete. In addition, the researcher is dependent on respondents completing and returning the questionnaire. However, as the questionnaire had been pilot tested several years earlier, and due to the large number of participants taking part in the study (a total of 80), the advantages of using a questionnaire were considered to outweigh the disadvantages noted above.

### **3.3 THE QUESTIONNAIRE**

The questionnaire (See Appendix C) consisted of four main sections (Parts A, B, C and D) and 23 questions over 13 pages. Parts A, B and C elicited data about ESOL teachers' attitudes to the use of Taboo English in society. Part D of the questionnaire focused on eliciting information about teachers' attitudes to teaching about Taboo English in the second language classroom. Part D also sought to explore strategies employed by ESOL teachers to address Taboo English in the second language classroom. Teachers were encouraged to add qualitative comments about their choice of answers.

**Part A** gathered data of a demographic nature such as gender, age group and the ethnic origin of participants. This first section of the questionnaire also collected information about the teachers' first language and about the courses they presently taught.

**Part B** elicited the ESOL teachers' attitudes towards the offensiveness of taboo words heard in society. Participants were asked to evaluate the degree of offensiveness of a list of 20 Taboo English words. Part B also included a question designed to investigate perceptions of how frequently taboo words were heard in the public domain.

**Part C** also surveyed teachers' attitudes towards their own use of Taboo English. This section of the questionnaire also examined the reasons teachers used taboo words. This question was adapted from Bayard and Krishynna's New Zealand study (2001) investigating gender and taboo language use in New Zealand. This section also

investigated the taboo words used by participants in everyday conversations and the uses of 'fuck' and the gender-biased taboo words such as 'mother-fucker' and 'cunt' were examined. Finally, the addition of several Maori words was an attempt to examine the participants' familiarity with taboo Maori words which are commonly heard in everyday conversation by some sectors of society in New Zealand. The final question in this section of the questionnaire specifically aimed to elicit qualitative data and asked for teacher comments about Taboo English in everyday use.

**Part D** surveyed teachers' attitudes towards teaching about taboo words to adult learners of conversational English. This section also aimed to investigate when teachers addressed taboo words. Teachers were asked to evaluate the importance of teaching 8 taboo words frequently heard in society today. A question was also designed to explore techniques teachers used to address taboo language in the L2 classroom. The final question in this section specifically aimed to elicit qualitative data and asked teachers to describe their attitudes to teaching about taboo words in the L2 classroom.

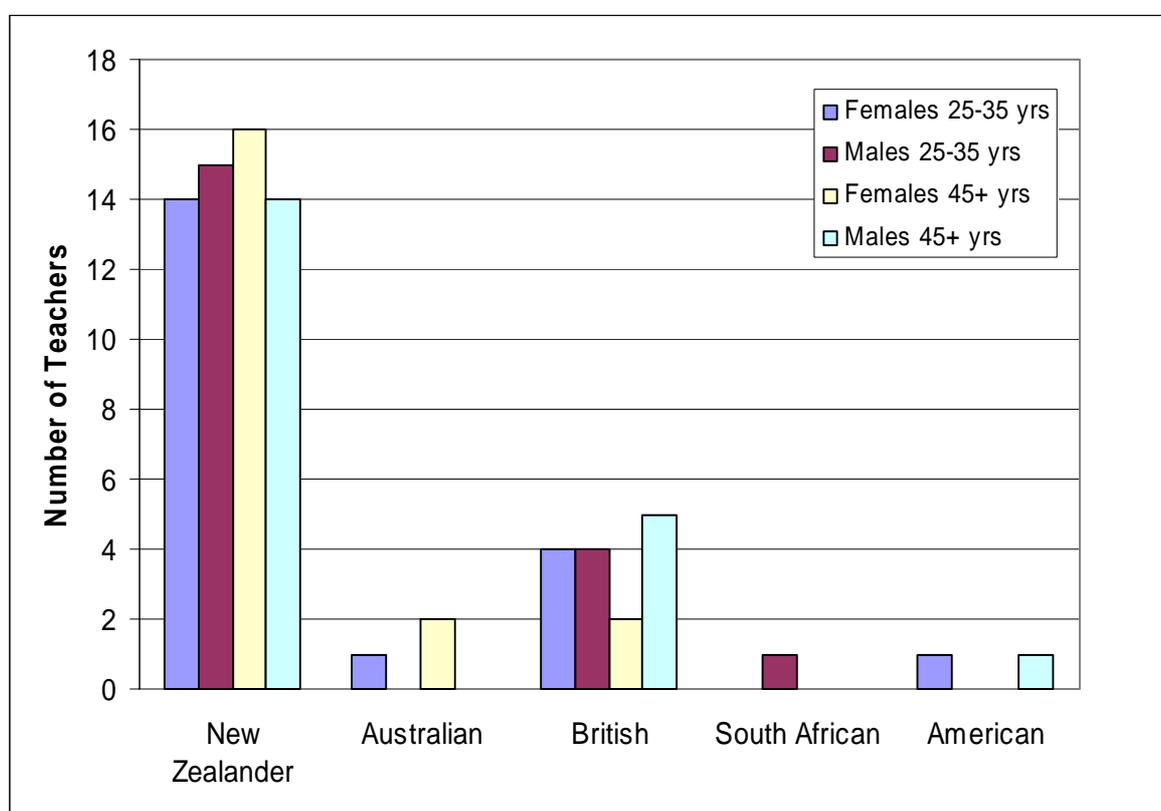
### **3.4 THE PARTICIPANTS**

The study first involved the random selection of 10 English language schools in Auckland. Initial meetings were held with the head of each school to discuss the study. Several of the directors expressed concern about the offensive nature of the language contained in the questionnaire (Appendix C). These directors were assured that the participant information sheet (Appendix A) and consent form (Appendix B) clearly informed participants that the project was about taboo words in English and that participants would be asked questions concerning words that they could find offensive. Participants were also informed that they were free to withdraw from the project at any time.

Overall, the directors of these language schools proved to be very supportive and a total of 100 questionnaires were distributed to staff at the 10 language schools. In order to identify any differences in attitudes relating to gender and age, the questionnaire was administered to 50 male and 50 female participants. However, finding 50 male ESOL teachers proved to be more difficult than I had envisaged. After many follow-up phone

calls, I arranged to personally collect the completed questionnaires from an agreed location such as the teachers' pigeon-holes as well as from the school receptionist. A total of 89 questionnaires were collected between July 2003 and March 2004. Nine questionnaires were unusable as they were completed by non-native ESOL teachers. The return rate achieved was very high (89%). The extensive comments revealed that individuals were clearly keen to express their views and opinions about the use of taboo language in society and about teaching this topic in the L2 classroom.

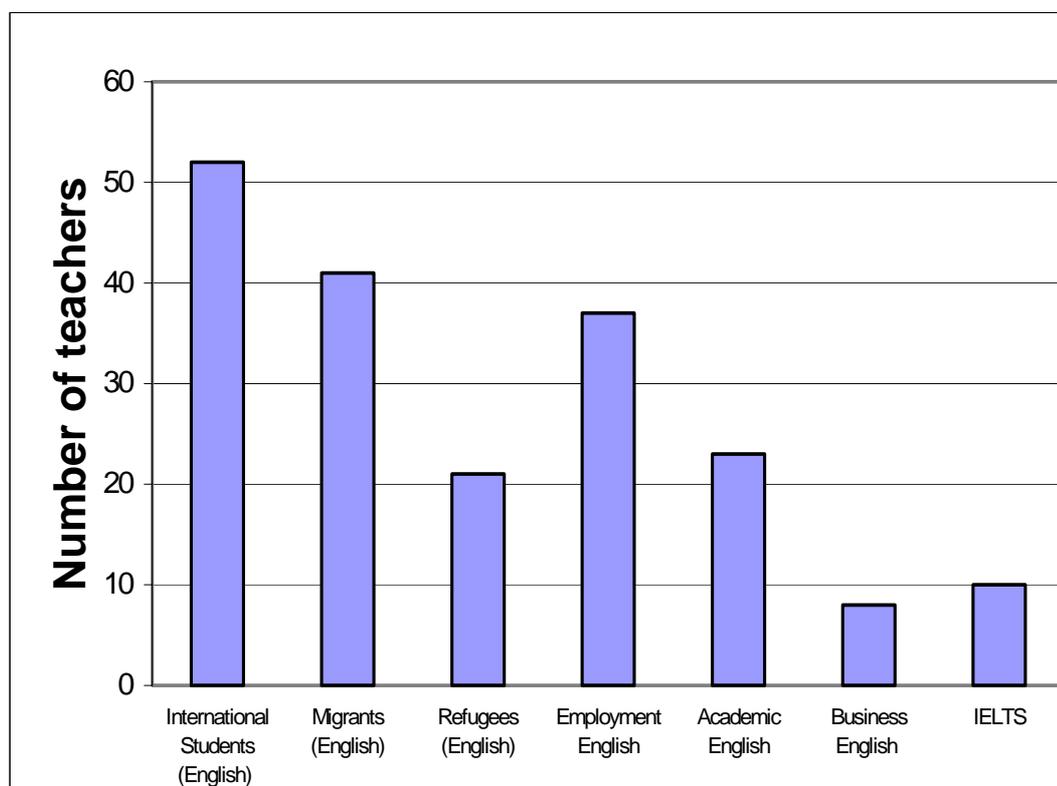
A total of 80 teachers (40 male and 40 female) participated in the study. Half of these participants were aged between 25-35 years and the other half were 45+ years of age. Figure 6 shows the nationality and age of the participants.



**Figure 6. Nationality Of Participants**

It is clear from Figure 6 that most of the participants in this study were from New Zealand. In fact, 59 of the 80 participants were from New Zealand, while 16 were from the United Kingdom. Three of the remaining participants were born in Australia, two in America and one in South Africa. Despite the varying nationalities, all participants spoke English as a first language.

While all the participants in the study were experienced teachers, there was a noticeable difference in the number of years the teachers had taught ESOL. As expected, the younger teachers had considerably less experience than the older teachers. On average, the 25-35 females had taught ESOL for 5 years, while the 25-35 males had an average of 4.5 years in the second language classroom. The older teachers had considerably many more years experience. The 45+ females had an average of 13 years of teaching experience. However, the 45+ male teachers had taught ESOL the most number of years with an average of 16.5 years. The following figure illustrates the courses presently taught by participants in the study.



**Figure 7. Courses Presently Taught By Participants**

Many teachers taught across a number of courses and would typically spend the morning, for example, teaching General English to migrants and the afternoon session teaching Employment English. However, the vast majority of teachers (80%) in this study taught General English courses. Sixty five percent of those surveyed taught General English to international students. Just over half of the participants also taught General English to migrant learners, while 46% taught Employment English classes and 26% taught General English to refugees. Far fewer teachers in the study taught academic courses. Almost a quarter of the participants taught Academic English classes and around 10% of the teachers taught IELTS and Business English classes.

It is noteworthy that almost 80% of teachers who participated in this study taught General English to either international students, migrants, refugees or students attending employment English courses. It is important to point out that teachers of General English courses would have greater opportunity to explore Taboo English in context during these General English lessons while the opportunity or need to investigate the topic of taboo words would be less likely to arise in Academic or Business English courses and IELTS preparation courses.

### **3.5 DATA ANALYSIS**

The responses for each participant were tabulated in a database. This was then used to perform statistical analysis in order to compare the findings for each gender and also the different age groups. Pages of qualitative statements were synthesised using a 'content analysis' procedure to generate themes and trends. Many of the responses to the open questions could be classified into a number of categories using key words and phrases.

#### **Part A**

The data from Part One of the questionnaire has been tabulated to create a profile of the background of participants including the number of years participants had taught ESOL.

## **Part B**

The data from Part B of the questionnaire evaluated the degree of offensiveness of a list of 20 Taboo English words on the following 5 point scale: (1) totally inoffensive, (2) slightly offensive, (3) moderately offensive, (4) very offensive and (5) totally offensive. Responses regarding the offensiveness of the words for each scale from 1-5 were tallied and percentages were calculated. The results for 'totally inoffensive' (1) and 'slightly offensive' (2) were combined to achieve the 8 words considered to be the least offensive. The top 8 words considered to be most offensive were also calculated. This ranking was achieved by combining the results for 'very offensive' (4) and 'totally offensive' (5). The remaining three questions in Part B investigated the teachers' perceptions of how frequently taboo words were heard in the public domain. Teachers were asked to use a three point scale, (1=never, 2= sometimes and 3=often) to assess how often tertiary students on a university campus, workers in a factory and pedestrians on the street might hear taboo words. Responses were tallied and percentages were also calculated.

## **Part C**

The research also surveyed teachers' attitudes towards their own use of Taboo English using a three point scale (1=never, 2= sometimes and 3=often). Teachers were asked to use this scale to assess perceptions of their personal use of Taboo English in daily conversation. The responses of frequency were tallied and percentages were also calculated. The second question in this section investigated teachers' perception about why they employed taboo language in everyday conversation. Teachers were asked to assess their reason(s) for using taboo words from the following four functions:

- a) to express surprise, annoyance or frustration
- b) to express a jocular insult
- c) to intensify adjectives or nouns (for emphasis)
- d) to express a serious insult.

The third question in Part C encouraged teachers to list taboo words and phrases that they also commonly used to express themselves in everyday conversation. A common theme to emerge was the use of 'fuck'. These phrases were then presented in Figure 5. The reasons why teachers used 'fuck' were also analysed. The results of the fourth

question in Section C were analysed in a number of ways. Participants were given a list of 24 words and asked to select the words they used to express themselves from the above four functions. The frequency of use of gender biased words by participants such as 'arsehole', 'bastard', 'dick' and 'jerk' and 'wanker' as well as 'bitch', 'cunt' and 'mother-fucker' were also tallied. Finally, the frequency of use of the three Maori taboo words 'teke', 'teko' and 'hangi pants' were also analysed and discussed.

The final question in Part C asked teachers to write down their attitudes to the use of Taboo English in society. The extensive comments revealed that individuals were clearly keen to express their opinions about the use of taboo language in society. Participants very frequently shared similar views and many of the responses to the open questions could be classified into a number of categories such as:

- 1) Taboo English is more prolific in society today than it was a decade or so ago.
- 2) The media has been influential in changing public attitude to the acceptability of certain words.
- 3) These days the younger generation use taboo language more frequently in public.

#### **Part D**

Part D of the questionnaire focused on eliciting information about teachers' attitudes to teaching about Taboo English in the second language classroom. Part D also sought to explore strategies employed by ESOL teachers to address Taboo English in the second language classroom. This section of the questionnaire generated pages and pages of qualitative comments. Question 1 surveyed teachers' attitudes towards teaching about taboo words to adult ESOL learners of conversational English. Teachers were asked to tick either 'yes' or 'no' to indicate if they taught about Taboo English in the second language classroom. Question 2 asked teachers to indicate if and when they taught about Taboo English by selecting one or more of the following four choices.

- a) never
- b) only when students bring up the words
- c) when I feel there is a need during the lesson
- d) during a specific 'swearing lesson'.

Questions three and four in Part D asked teachers to tick either 'important to teach' or 'do not teach in any context' to indicate whether they considered any of the following eight words commonly heard in society today worthy of teaching time in the L2 classroom.

- 1) shit
- 2) bastard
- 3) bloody
- 4) God
- 5) fuck (+ variants)
- 6) bugger
- 7) hell
- 8) piss (+ variants)

Question five investigated the strategies employed by teachers to teach about the 8 words above. Teachers were asked to indicate how they addressed these words by selecting one or more of the following 5 choices. The results were calculated and the findings were compared for each demographic group.

- 1) Ignore it.
- 2) Explain where it is appropriate and inappropriate to use.
- 3) Teach the pronunciation, grammar and collocation.
- 4) Teach the function and give further examples.
- 5) Other.

Question 6 was primarily designed to explore techniques teachers used to address taboo language in the L2 classroom. The ESOL teachers were asked to give examples of how they taught about taboo words. These techniques listed by the teachers were categorised into four categories and presented in Table 10. The seventh and final question in Part D asked teachers to write down their attitudes to teaching about Taboo English. Participants very frequently shared similar views and the majority of the responses to the open questions could be classified into two main categories:

- 1) Teachers should teach about Taboo English in the second language classroom.
- 2) It is not the role of the teacher to address taboo language in the second language classroom.

### **3.6 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter has discussed the research method used in the study. An interpretive approach was chosen to address the questions in this study because this paradigm best offered insights into a deeper understanding of teachers' attitudes towards Taboo English in society and teachers' attitudes towards teaching about Taboo English in the second language classroom. An overview of the questionnaire was provided. Finally, the participants and the research procedure were discussed in detail.

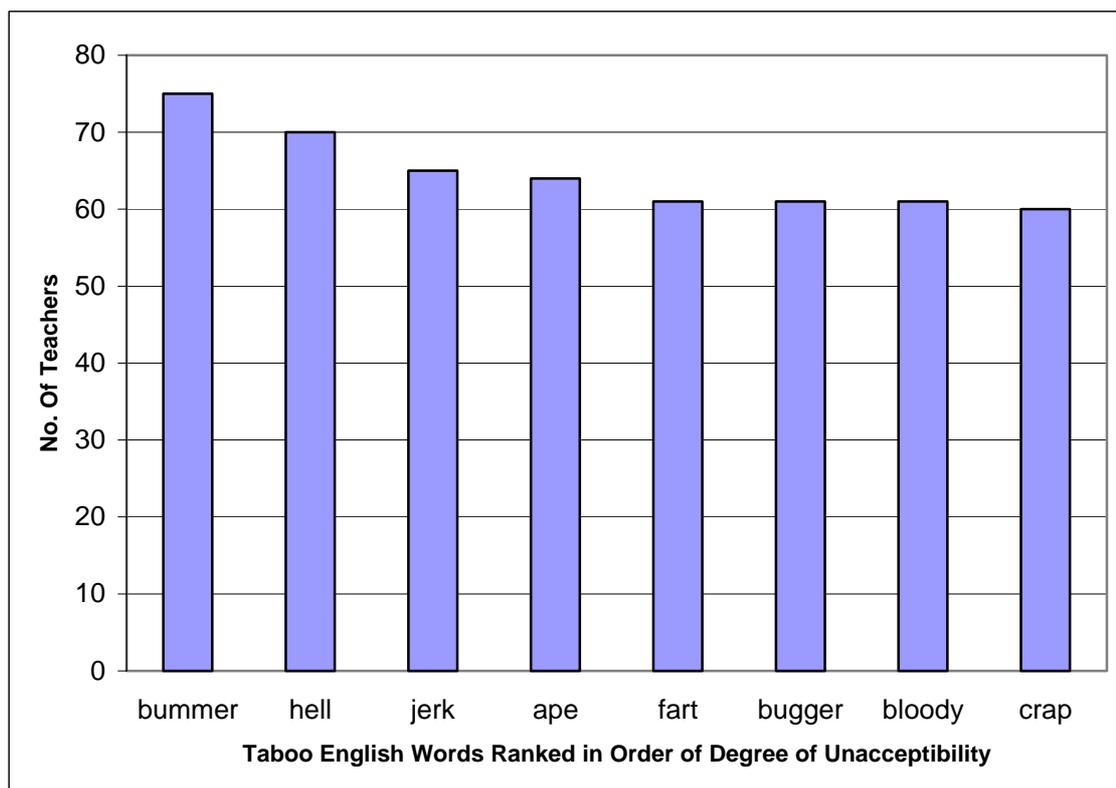
**CHAPTER FOUR**  
**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS**  
**TABOO ENGLISH IN SOCIETY**

**4.1 CHAPTER OVERVIEW**

Chapter 4 reports on the findings investigating ESOL teachers' attitudes to the use of Taboo English heard in society today and examines why teachers use taboo language. This chapter also highlights why there is pedagogical value in teaching Taboo English to adult learners of conversational English.

**4.2 TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE OFFENSIVENESS OF TABOO WORDS HEARD IN EVERYDAY CONVERSATION**

Participants were asked to evaluate the degree of offensiveness of a list of 20 Taboo English words on the following 5 point scale: (1) totally inoffensive, (2) slightly offensive, (3) moderately offensive, (4) very offensive and (5) totally offensive. It is important to point out that the 20 words on this list were selected after the analysis of the results of an earlier pilot study. Figure 8 presents the findings, with the top 8 words ranked in order of their degree of inoffensiveness by the 80 participants. These results were achieved by combining the results for 'totally inoffensive' (1) and 'slightly offensive' (2).



**Figure 8. The Top 8 Taboo English Words Rated Least Offensive By ESOL Teachers**

Two words emerged as the least offensive words on the list. The vast majority of teachers (94%) judged ‘bummer’ to be the least offensive followed by ‘hell’ at 88%. Also considered relatively harmless by more than three quarters of those surveyed, were ‘jerk’ (81%), ‘ape’ (80%), ‘fart’ (76%), ‘bugger’ (76%) and ‘bloody’ (76%). ‘Crap’ at 75% completed the list of words perceived as the eight most acceptable. It is quite surprising that teachers considered the rather innocuous word ‘ape’ to only be slightly less offensive than ‘jerk’. A closer analysis of the data shows that, in general, male teachers found ‘ape’ to be more offensive than their female counterparts, and thus, would take greater offence than females when referred to as an ‘ape’.

Overall, the words ‘fart’, ‘bugger’, ‘bloody’ and ‘crap’ were perceived to be equally harmless by participants. However, the younger participants considered ‘fart’ and ‘crap’ to be more unacceptable than ‘bugger’ and ‘bloody’. Conversely, the older participants regarded ‘bugger’ and ‘bloody’ to be less offensive than ‘fart’ and ‘crap’. It is interesting that ‘fart’ and ‘crap’, words relating to bodily excrement, are thought to be as

equally offensive as the terms ‘bugger’ and ‘bloody’. These results supported Andersson and Trudgill’s (1990) argument that the cleanliness of the body, soul and language do not exist in isolation. In Western culture taboo words are often related to the concept of purity and cleanliness and words related to faeces, such as ‘fart’ and ‘crap’ evoke strong feelings of distaste.

Of major interest here was the acceptance by participants of the terms ‘bugger’ and ‘bloody’ into the vernacular. Once considered highly unacceptable, these two words appear to cause little offence to the majority. In fact, 61 out of 80 participants regarded both of these words as either totally inoffensive (Grade 1) or slightly offensive (Grade 2). It should also be added that participants were of the belief that ‘bugger’ was slightly less offensive than the word ‘bloody’. It is also clear that the older males had the most liberal attitude towards both of these words, ranking them the least offensive. For example, these 45+ males graded the word ‘bloody’ as the fourth least offensive word, whereas, on the whole, it was perceived to be more unacceptable by all other participants. The females in the study judged it to be the 8<sup>th</sup> least offensive word on the list, while it was considered to be the 10<sup>th</sup> least offensive word by the 25-35 males. The following comments made by several participants support the claim that these two terms are losing currency as Taboo English words:

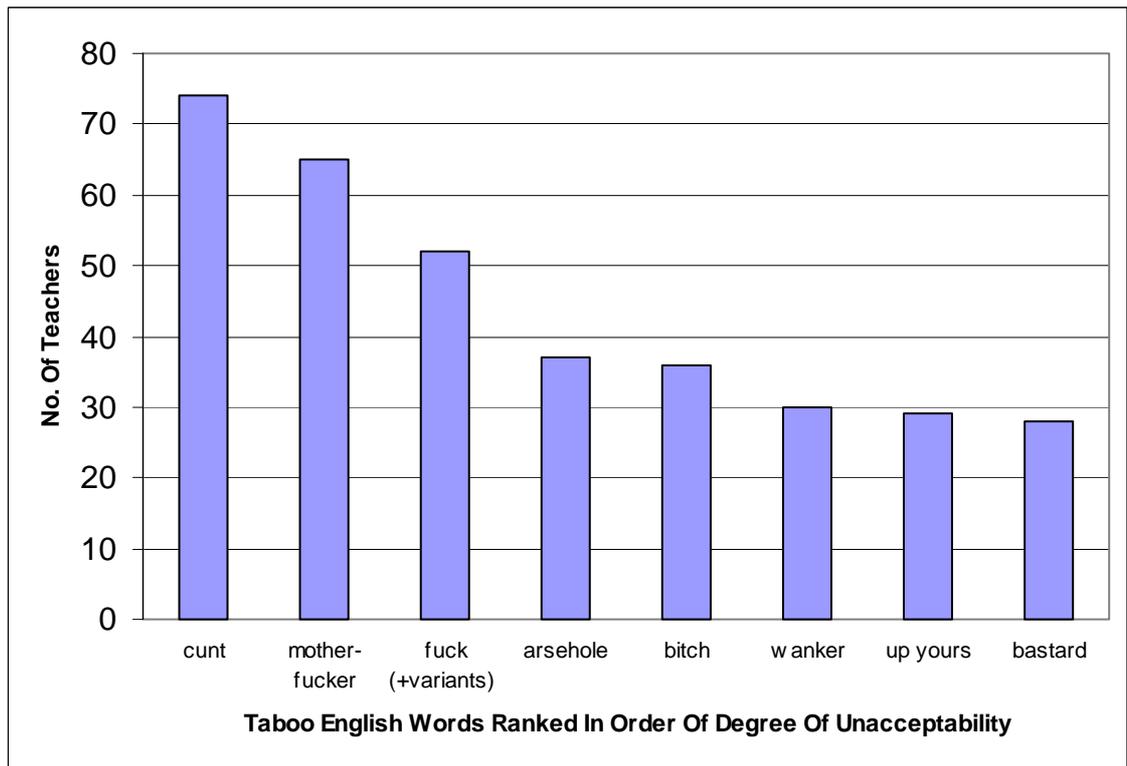
*“Terms such as bloody, bugger and fuck are so frequently heard that they have largely lost the status as swear words. They don’t convey an especially strong message.”*

*“Words like bugger, bloody and shit have become less offensive. Those with religious associations such as hell and the blasphemous use of God and Jesus Christ have become so commonplace that they are almost part of the common vernacular. One wonders how offended Buddhists etc. might be if their profits (sic) were insulted in such a way.”*

*“Phrases like bugger and piss off and even bullshit are nowadays considered to be fairly mild by most people.”*

The finding that 'bugger' and 'bloody' are noticeably losing currency as taboo words is in line with the results of the 1999 nation-wide random survey conducted by Colmar Brunton Research for the New Zealand Broadcasting Standards Authority investigating attitudes towards offensive language on New Zealand radio and television. Participants in this study also had little objection to the use of the words 'bloody' and 'bugger' ranking them as the two least offensive on a list of 22 words. Here again, 'bugger' was found to be less offensive than 'bloody'. On this list of words 'bugger' was ranked in 21 first position whereas 'bloody' appeared at the bottom of the list in 22 second place with only a very small minority objecting to its use. It could therefore be argued that 'bugger' is rapidly losing currency as a taboo word in the eyes of the public. Furthermore, the perception that it is no longer a taboo word has been greatly boosted by its humorous use in the popular 'Toyota Bugger Ad' screened on New Zealand television. In fact, today, this once considered taboo word has almost been given iconic status by the media in Aotearoa.

Figure 9 illustrates how words once considered highly offensive are also losing currency as taboo words and also shows the 8 words judged to be the most offensive by ESOL teachers.



**Figure 9. The Top 8 Taboo English Words Rated Most Offensive By ESOL Teachers**

Figure 9 presents the findings, with the top 8 words ranked in order of their degree of unacceptability. This ranking was achieved by combining the results for ‘very offensive’ (4) and ‘totally offensive’ (5). Three words clearly emerged as unacceptable by a majority of the respondents. The taboo words ‘cunt’ (93%) and ‘mother-fucker’ (81%) were rated by the 80 participants to be the top two most offensive words followed by ‘fuck’ at 65%. In fact, all participants in the study, regardless of age and gender, were in agreement that these three words were the most offensive taboo words in the English language today. However, closer analysis of the data revealed that the younger ESOL teachers perceived ‘cunt’ and ‘mother-fucker’ to be slightly more offensive than their older counterparts. Similarly, slightly more females found these two words to be more offensive than the males in the study. The ranking of ‘cunt’, ‘mother-fucker’ and ‘fuck’ as the top three most offensive words by New Zealand ESOL teachers is hardly surprising given the offensiveness of the words. These results are also similar to studies investigating the use of taboo words on television in the United

Kingdom and New Zealand. The British study conducted by Hargrave (2000) also found that viewers perceived the taboo words 'cunt' (83%), followed by 'mother-fucker' (79%) and 'fuck' at 71% as being the three most offensive words in the English language today.

The attitudes of the participants in this study towards the ranking of these three words were virtually identical to those respondents who had participated in the 1993 and 1999 national surveys commissioned by the Broadcasting Standards Authority on public attitudes towards broadcasting standards in New Zealand.

Eighty percent of those in the 1993 survey found the use of 'cunt' and 'mother-fucker' to be the two most offensive words while three quarters of the sample rated 'fuck' as the third most offensive word. The results of 1999 study also found that more than three-quarters of the New Zealand population perceived 'cunt' (79.3%) and 'mother-fucker' (77.8%) to be totally unacceptable followed by 'nigger' (71.5%) and 'fuck' at (69.9%). It appears that 'cunt' and 'mother-fucker' are regarded as the final frontier by the majority. However, responses from this study suggest that 'fuck' is losing shock value. It is worth pointing out that while 65% of the participants ranked this word as the third most offensive on the list, just over a quarter of the participants graded this word as moderately offensive. Interestingly, five out of the 80 participants considered this word to be either slightly or totally offensive. The word 'fuck' is not only becoming increasingly frequent in the latest hip hop lyrics and block buster movies, but also is repeatedly appearing in more formal contexts such as television news programmes. If this trend continues, this once frowned-upon taboo word is likely to further lose currency in future years as public perception changes in response to its increasing exposure in the media.

From Figure 9, we can observe that the ranking of the fourth to eighth least offensive words was far less clear cut. The taboo words, 'arsehole' (47%) and 'bitch' (45%) saw about half of the respondents object to their use. Slightly down the order, but still regarded as highly offensive by almost 30 out of 80 participants, were 'wanker' (38%) and 'up yours' (37%). 'Bastard' at 35% completed the list of words perceived to be the eight most offensive. A closer analysis of the data reveals that both ages and genders regarded the word 'bitch' to be more offensive than 'bastard'. As a generalisation, the younger teachers are less accepting of the word 'bitch' than their older counterparts.

Reasons for this difference could well be investigated in further research. Interestingly, the older female participants were the most tolerant of this word and graded it the least offensive. This group perceived 'bitch' to be the 8<sup>th</sup> most offensive word on the list while the other participants generally considered 'bitch' to be the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> most offensive word. This is a somewhat surprising finding considering that this term is a gender-specific insult and is traditionally used as an insult against women.

However, a very different picture emerges in regard to the perceived offensiveness of the words, 'Jesus Christ'. In this instance, the 45+ females demonstrated higher disapproval levels towards the use of this word than any other demographic group in the study. The older females considered 'Jesus Christ' to be the 4<sup>th</sup> most offensive word on the list. This is noticeably further up the list of offensiveness than the other participants who generally ranked it in 12<sup>th</sup> position.

An interesting question therefore is why do older females consider the words 'Jesus Christ' to be so offensive? One possible explanation could be that this older generation attended 'bible classes' at school during their childhood years. Here they were taught that 'Jesus Christ' was a name to be revered and to be used appropriately rather than relegated to coarse language. Furthermore, it could also be possible that these women are 'practising Christians' today and view the use of 'Jesus Christ' as a swear word as extremely disrespectful and denigrating to the Christian religion. However, these hypothesis cannot be substantiated as this questionnaire did ask for information about the participants' religious beliefs.

The following table provides an overview and further interesting insights into the grading of the 20 taboo words by participants. The lowest number on the scale (1) indicates the words perceived to the least offensive while the highest number on the scale (5) indicates words considered to be the most offensive by participants.

**Table 1. The Most Common Grading Of Taboo Words In Order Of Offensiveness**

<b>GRADE 1</b> (Totally inoffensive)	<b>GRADE 2</b> (Slightly offensive)	<b>GRADE 3</b> (Moderately offensive)	<b>GRADE 4</b> (Very offensive)	<b>GRADE 5</b> (Totally offensive)
bummer	bloody	arsehole	fuck (+var)	cunt
hell	dick	bastard		mother-fucker
jerk	bugger	bitch		
ape	crap	piss off (+var)		
fart	shit	wanker		
	up yours			
	Jesus Christ			

As expected, the study found that gender and age played a key role in ESOL teachers' attitudes towards the offensiveness of Taboo English words commonly heard in the public domain today. Overall, males adopted a more liberal attitude when confronted with Taboo English. In fact, the 45+ males demonstrated the highest levels of tolerance, grading the majority of words as being less offensive than the other demographic groups. These results tend to support the general view by scholars such as Lakoff (1975) and more recently Holmes (2001) and Romaine (2000) that men tend to use more non-standard forms of speech including taboo words than women. This finding is also in line with studies conducted by Selnow (1985) who investigated gender differences of 135 American undergraduate students (61 females and 74 males) in their perceptions and uses of Taboo English. One of Selnow's most significant findings was that which found women to be less tolerant of taboo use on television and in formal settings. On the basis of this finding, one possible explanation is that some of the women in this study were mothers of young children and that they were concerned about their children's viewing of adult programmes which may contain taboo language. Perhaps, these females display higher levels of concern about taboo words on television because of the perceived influence of such language on young children. These mothers could be worried that the exposure of offensive language on television may result in their young children imitating this bad language in the playground.

Age also emerged as an important variable. Contrary to expectations, the younger teachers were generally less tolerant of taboo words than expected. It is interesting that the levels of acceptability towards taboo words tended to increase as the respondents got older. In most cases, both the older female and male teachers were more tolerant of taboo words than their younger counterparts. An illustration of this difference in opinion towards the offensiveness by the two age groups is the grading of the word 'piss off' as slightly offensive (Grade 2) by the older teachers, compared to moderately offensive by the younger teachers (Grade 3). The same trend is evident in the use of the word 'bugger'. Once again, this was judged to be totally inoffensive (Grade 1) by the older teachers and slightly offensive (Grade 2) by the younger participants. The results also showed that 25-35 females demonstrated the highest levels of unacceptability by grading the words as most offensive. As previously mentioned, the older males in the study demonstrated the most liberal attitude towards the taboo words. It is important to point out that the difference in attitudes between these two demographic groups was quite pronounced. For example, while the younger females generally considered the word 'wanker' to be very offensive (Grade 4), the older males perceived this word to be only slightly offensive (Grade 2).

The research also found that, on the whole, ESOL teachers were, as expected, more permissive of certain words commonly heard in the public domain than others. Teachers shared a consensus on three words that were perceived to be totally offensive language. Regardless of age or gender, all participants were consistently unaccepting of the words, 'cunt', 'mother-fucker' and 'fuck'. However, this is where the similarity ends. Another noteworthy finding of the study is the ranking of the remaining 17 words on the list. The analysis reveals the broad range of opinions about the offensiveness of most words. While relatively large numbers of respondents were more than moderately offended by particular words, relatively large proportions of the sample were not offended at all. A very good example of these differences in opinion is the grading of 'Jesus Christ'. This taboo word was graded by the younger males as totally inoffensive (Grade 1). However, many of the older females in the study considered 'Jesus Christ' to be totally offensive (Grade 5).

It is also important to point out that the opinions about many taboo words can be considered substantially polarised within one demographic group. The grading of the word 'shit' by the 25-35 males is a good illustration of how the levels of unacceptability

varied within a demographic group. These younger males were divided on the offensiveness of this word. Some considered it to be totally inoffensive (Grade 1) or slightly offensive (Grade 2) while others found it to be moderately offensive (Grade 3) and even very offensive (Grade 4). Again, these varying opinions demonstrate how one group may perceive a word to be totally innocuous while the same word could be considered highly offensive by another group.

Another key point that emerged from the data was the ESOL teachers' perceptions that the amount of Taboo English heard on television has changed over the years. Generally, participants were in agreement that the media has been influential in changing public attitude towards the acceptability of certain words in the English language. This view is reflected by the following comments from a number of participants:

*“Swearing and profanity seem to be more prolific nowadays than 10 years ago. Certain words and phrases like crap, piss off and dickhead have been incorporated into everyday vocabulary. This is because these words have become acceptable on TV programmes.”*

*“The widespread use of swearing on TV and in movies, in my opinion, has contributed to the widespread presence of swearing and profanity in everyday use.”*

*“Television has made great contribution towards our understanding of what words are considered taboo or offensive.”*

*“Taboo words are now widely promoted on film and television.”*

These findings have direct implications for the ESOL classroom. Firstly, these results show that taboo words are perceived to have varying degrees of offensiveness by members of an English speaking society. L2 learners need to be aware that three words are generally considered to be universally taboo. It is essential that L2 learners are able to recognise offensive words and I argue that it is vital for teachers, at the very least, to inform their students about the offensiveness of the words ‘cunt’, ‘motherfucker’ and ‘fuck’. Learners need to know that ‘cunt’ refers to the female genitals and that it is also a gender-biased term used to refer to women in a derogatory manner. It is also important

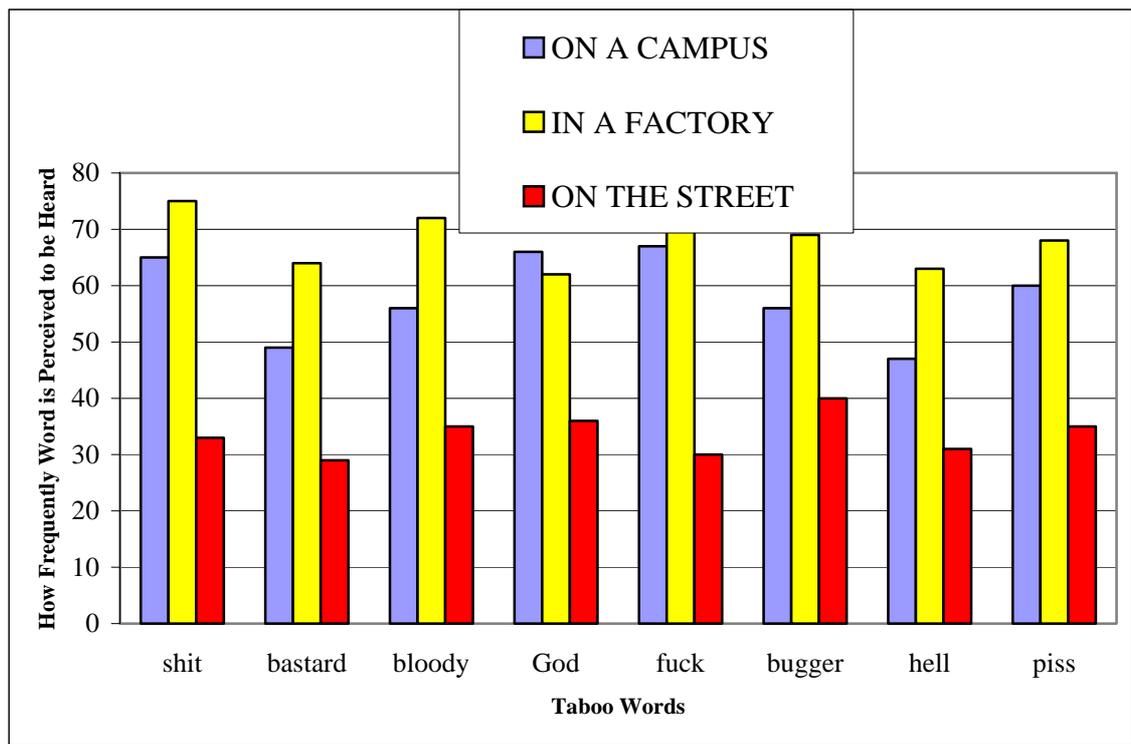
to stress that this word is considered to be the most unprintable and ‘unsayable’ word in society today and is closely followed by mother-fucker. Again, learners need to know that the term ‘mother-fucker’ is gender-loaded and also refers to women in a derogatory manner. It is vital that students are aware of the literal meaning of taboo words. For example, ‘mother-fucker’ refers to one accused of violating the taboo known to humankind - incest. In addition, it is important to inform students about the meaning and use of the taboo word ‘fuck’, perceived to be the third most offensive word by the vast majority of participants in this study.

These findings also illustrate how opinions can differ regarding attitudes towards the offensiveness of Taboo English words. This, in turn, demonstrates the subjectivity English speakers have towards the offensiveness of Taboo English words. As the results have shown, it is possible for one group to perceive a word as totally innocuous, while another group could find the same word totally unacceptable. These results also clearly support my argument that learners need implicit instruction regarding the varying degrees of offensiveness of these taboo words as it can be difficult for newcomers to an English speaking society to gauge the strength of these words.

The following section investigates participants’ attitudes towards the frequency of Taboo English use in society today.

### **4.3 WORDS THAT ESOL TEACHERS PERCEIVED TO BE OFTEN HEARD IN SOCIETY**

This question was designed to investigate ESOL teachers’ perceptions of how often the following 8 words were heard in the public domain: ‘shit’, ‘bastard’, ‘bloody’, ‘God’, ‘fuck’ and variants (such as ‘fucking’, ‘fucked’, ‘fucker’, ‘fuck off’ and ‘fuck up’), ‘bugger’, ‘hell’ and ‘piss’ and variants (such as ‘pissing’, ‘pissed’ and ‘piss off’). The teachers were asked to use a three point scale (1=never, 2=sometimes and 3=often) to assess how frequently workers in factory, tertiary students on campus and pedestrians on the street might hear these taboo words. The findings of this question are summarised in Figure 10.



**Figure 10. Words That ESOL Teachers Perceived To Be Often Heard By Factory Employees At Work, Tertiary Students On A University Campus And Pedestrians On the Street**

I argue that taboo words are a living part of language and are heard more frequently in both the private and public domains. Responses indicated that ESOL teachers shared a similar view, expecting ‘shit’, ‘fuck’ and ‘bugger’ to be the three most frequently heard taboo words in the public arena. A recurring theme was the liberal approach participants demonstrated towards the use of taboo words in everyday conversation and the expectation that younger speakers used Taboo English more frequently than older speakers.

#### **4.3.1 Words that ESOL teachers perceived to be often heard by factory employees at work**

From Figure 10, we can observe that more than three quarters of those surveyed expected factory employees to have the highest use of Taboo English. There was wide

agreement by 94% of the participants that ‘shit’, followed by ‘bloody’ (90%) and ‘fuck’ (89%) were the three most commonly used taboo words by factory workers. This finding supports the typical stereotype that swearing is the habit of the working class. However, the view that Taboo English was particularly prevalent in a factory was disputed by one participant who stated:

*“Just because people work in a factory environment, it’s no reason to assume that they use offensive language any more than other people do.”*

Several teachers expressed concern about their speculative choice of answers regarding the frequency of use of Taboo English by factory employees. Their concerns about how often taboo words were heard in this hypothetical situation are reflected by the following comments:

*“I don’t know! I haven’t spent any significant amount of time in a factory”.*

*“I think it depends on the workers” and “it really depends a lot on the type of factory, the attitude of the superiors, the culture of the workplace as well as the number of native speakers.”*

However, those participants who had actually experienced working in a factory were in agreement that Taboo English was commonly heard on the workshop floor. The following comments by these ESOL teachers strongly suggests that the public perception that Taboo English is frequently used in a factory is warranted.

*“I worked in a factory for three years. We always used swear words. But it wasn’t considered to be swearing. It was just the way we all spoke.”*

*“It’s everyday language on the workshop floors” and a “few turn the air blue with swearing.”*

*“I have worked in many factories over the years and have heard every swear word in the book.”*

An older male participant and a former factory employee, also discussed the social functions of Taboo English and how factory workers used taboo words to identify themselves as members of a particular community of practice and as a way of affirming group culture (Pilkington 1992):

*“Swearing is part of a culture of ‘the factory floor’. It establishes camaraderie – them and us”.*

With regard to demographic patterns, the most interesting pattern, regardless of age or gender, was the wide agreement about the frequency of use of the 8 taboo words listed by factory workers. However, closer analysis revealed that slightly more of the older participants, particularly males, expected factory employees to use taboo words the most often. Perhaps the simplest explanation for this finding, is that a greater number of the older teachers have had first-hand experience working in a factory environment compared to their younger counterparts. It is also worth mentioning that, in general, ESOL teachers regarded the rather innocuous terms, ‘God’ and ‘hell’ to be least frequently used by factory employees. On the basis of this finding, it could be said that ESOL teachers perceived Taboo English to be prevalent on the factory floor. Moreover, participants also expected factory employees to use more offensive words such as ‘fuck’ rather than mild forms of taboo language such as ‘God’ and ‘hell.’

#### **4.3.2 Words that ESOL teachers perceived to be often heard by tertiary students on a university campus**

A further consideration of Figure 10 shows that the majority of ESOL teachers also expected taboo words to be prevalent on a university campus. Participants expected ‘fuck’ (84%), ‘God’ (83%) and ‘shit’ (81%) to be the three most commonly heard taboo words by tertiary students. A closer analysis of the qualitative comments showed that participants were more confident about their choice of answers regarding the amount of taboo language heard on a university campus in comparison to their answers about the frequency of Taboo English heard in a factory. The following excerpts were typical of the comments elicited by this question, strongly indicating that a number of the teachers used to be university students in the past.

*“All in common usage. They are frequently used words!”*

*“It is very frustrating when the student uses a profane word in class, and when you express how inappropriate it is, the student’s response is one of total surprise. They respond, “Why? I hear this word all the time!”*

*“I was a student once and have also worked in a factory. I think that students and factory workers have the same expletive usage.”*

In addition, one participant also pointed out that in this day and age, it was not only students who could be heard using Taboo English as “tutors could also occasionally be heard using these words.”

Participants were also of the opinion that the amount of Taboo English used would vary depending on a student’s first language. Students who were native speakers of English were expected to use taboo language more often than international students who spoke English as a second language. The frequency of Taboo English heard by these two different communities of practice was reflected by the following comments:

*“It depends to a very large extent on how frugal my friends are and what kinds of social groups you belong to. For example, my friends are mainly international (students) so I rarely hear any kind of swear word.”*

*“Asian students who are less likely to read publications such as Craccum (a university publication) and participate in student based extra curricular activities on campus and in campus pubs etc. are less likely to be exposed to profanities.”*

Looking at the demographic variables, the following pattern emerged. Overall, the younger females expected university students to use Taboo English less frequently than the other demographic groups. This is apparent from a comparison of how often the teachers perceived the term ‘shit’ to be heard on a university campus. Sixty percent of the 25-35 females expected ‘shit’ to be used often by university students. In contrast, an equal number of younger males and older females (90%) and slightly fewer older males (80%) expected this word to be heard often on a university campus. It seems that these

younger females do not expect taboo words to be used as frequently in a place of learning as the other demographic groups.

The other main point of interest was the ESOL teachers' perceptions that 'fuck' was the most frequently used taboo word on a university campus. The use of 'fuck' by the younger generation is discussed in greater detail later (See Section 4.6.1). However, at this point, it is interesting to note that the teachers' perceptions that young people used 'fuck' very frequently was confirmed as later results showed that 'fuck' was indeed the most commonly employed word by the younger ESOL teachers in the current study.

### **4.3.3 Words that ESOL teachers perceived to be often heard by pedestrians on the street**

Overall, responses showed that at least a quarter of the ESOL teachers surveyed expected each of the 8 taboo words to also be frequently heard by pedestrians on the street. 'Bugger' at 50% was considered to be the most frequently heard word and this was closely followed by 'God' at 45%. An equal number of participants considered 'piss' and 'bloody' (44%) to be the third most commonly heard words by people on the street. It is perhaps not surprising that participants expected 'bugger' and 'bloody' to be commonly used in the public domain given that an earlier question (See Section 4.2) found that participants considered these two words to be relatively inoffensive. Therefore as 'bugger' and 'bloody' are regarded to be relatively innocuous terms, they have become more tolerated in every day conversation even when the conversation takes place in public areas such as on a bus, in a lift or in a cafe.

However, it is important to point out that a number of teachers voiced concerns about their choice of answers for this hypothetical situation. These reservations about over generalising are illustrated by the following comments:

*"It depends on where the pedestrian is."*

*"It depends on where they are and when they are there. Language on K Road at midnight will obviously be different from Milford at 2 pm."*

*“It depends on the city and the streets. More in Queen Street than a suburban street. (It also depends on) the time of day and night. There is more bad language at night. (It also depends on) the place on the street. There is more bad/Taboo English outside pubs etc.)”.*

However, other participants, notably those who travelled on the bus each day, were in agreement that Taboo English was being heard more frequently in the public arena. Moreover, these teachers were in agreement that the younger generation was using taboo language more frequently in public.

*“I am becoming more aware of younger people swearing more openly, publicly and with more confidence than ever before.”*

*“When I travel by bus, I hear most of these words quite frequently. Especially in the mornings from high school students.”*

*“If the pedestrians are passing groups of school children they will hear a lot of swearing.”*

With regard to demographic patterns, there is one notable feature. Once again the younger females in the present study expected taboo words to be heard by pedestrians on the street less frequently than the other demographic groups. However, Figure 10 does not convey several key themes that emerged from the qualitative data. Comments revealed that, generally, participants shared the view that swearing was an increasingly socio-linguistic norm of New Zealand society. Furthermore, local born participants stated that New Zealanders employed taboo words ‘because it’s a part of the Kiwi culture’. Thus, it could be argued that, to a certain degree, the use of taboo language reflects the patterns of ‘Kiwi’ culture and how people identify themselves as New Zealanders. In other words, New Zealanders could consider themselves to be a relatively ‘laid back’ nation of people and this view is reflected in the informal vocabulary used in every day speech. This argument was supported by the following comments:

*“Swearing has become commonplace and in some cases has almost become acceptable in everyday use. I feel that New Zealanders have a much more laid back attitude towards swearing.”*

*“It’s part of the Kiwi culture. We use it to express meaning, feeling or emotion. Every culture understands this sort of speech in everyday use. I don’t know many people who don’t swear.”*

*“Swearing is expected by the majority of people in everyday use in some form or another. It is just the ‘strength’ of the word that is questioned. E.g ‘Fuck’ may not be acceptable to the majority but ‘bugger’ would be.”*

*“It’s very widespread. It is impossible to refrain from swearing. You can easily get desensitised to swearing and not find it offensive.”*

Moreover, ESOL teachers born outside of New Zealand also commented on the casual attitude New Zealanders have towards swearing and the acceptability of certain taboo words into the New Zealand vernacular:

*“I feel that New Zealanders have a much more laid-back attitude towards swearing. ‘Bugger’ for example, is considered to be extremely offensive in England but it is almost acceptable here. I have also heard that Americans generally use ‘fuck’ less in everyday use than New Zealanders do.”*

*“In informal conversation, especially among New Zealanders I have noticed, since spending a lot of time with Canadians and Americans, that New Zealanders tend to use a lot more profanity, especially when they want to intensify adjectives i.e. That’s a ‘bloody’ beautiful day.”*

*“I was quite surprised at the amount of swearing on TV and radio in New Zealand. Not just on dramas etc, but also in interviews on news bulletins. Last night a nurse was interviewed regarding future salaries. She said, “And then the shit hit the fan.” There was no editing. I hear more swearing in the workplace in New Zealand than in any country I have worked in. I’m not so much offended as surprised.”*

It is also important to stress that there were participants who did not adopt such liberal attitudes towards the use of Taboo English in casual conversation. These participants disagreed that swearing was acceptable in everyday use and inferred that speakers who used taboo words were unintelligent or lacked education. This less tolerant attitude was reflected in the following comments:

*“I understand that swear words have become everyday language but to me when a speaker swears they show a lack of education.”*

*“Personally the use of swearing shows small mindedness and an inability to use language appropriately.”*

All of these findings have direct implications for the second language classroom. Taboo words are clearly prevalent in New Zealand society and it is important for L2 learners to know that words such as ‘shit’, ‘fuck’, ‘bugger’, ‘bloody’ and ‘piss’ are becoming more frequently heard in society today. Learners need to be aware that when speakers use Taboo English they are activating a verbal repertoire commonly used by their community of practice to express ideas, emotions and values. This is a demonstration of the speakers’ linguistic competence rather than an indication that the speaker is undereducated or has a weak grasp of the English language.

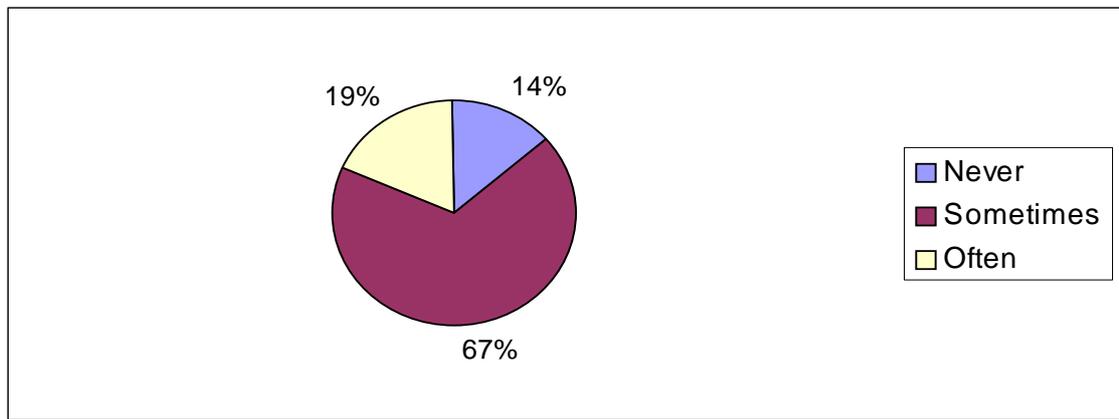
Native English speakers are generally aware of the social restrictions in certain situations and tend to select their opportunities for Taboo English use cautiously. Therefore, learners need to be aware that native speakers use a different formality of language depending on the context. Taboo English is tolerated in some situations and considered to be totally unacceptable in other circumstances. For example, the use of the words ‘Jesus fucking Christ’ is totally inappropriate at a church meeting but may not be so inappropriate at a New Years Eve party. It is vital that learners are aware that the public or private nature of a conversational situation can determine where the use of taboo words are acceptable. Generally, excessive swearing by strangers in a public place is considered to be unacceptable. Learners also need to know that even mild taboo words such as ‘bugger’ and ‘bloody’ are not usually spoken in front of children or in formal settings such as business meetings.

All adult native-speakers know about the subtleties surrounding Taboo English, however non-native speakers do not usually have a sophisticated knowledge of this aspect of the English language. Learners need direct instruction on how the use of Taboo English will depend on the social restrictions in each situation. This sociolinguistic knowledge about taboo words will enable and empower learners to better understand the complexities surrounding Taboo English in everyday casual conversation.

The following section examines the ESOL teachers' attitudes towards their own use of Taboo English in daily conversation and investigates the widely held view that males are more likely to use taboo words than females. Results indicate that gender differences and the use of taboo words, are not as pronounced as the international literature would lead us to believe.

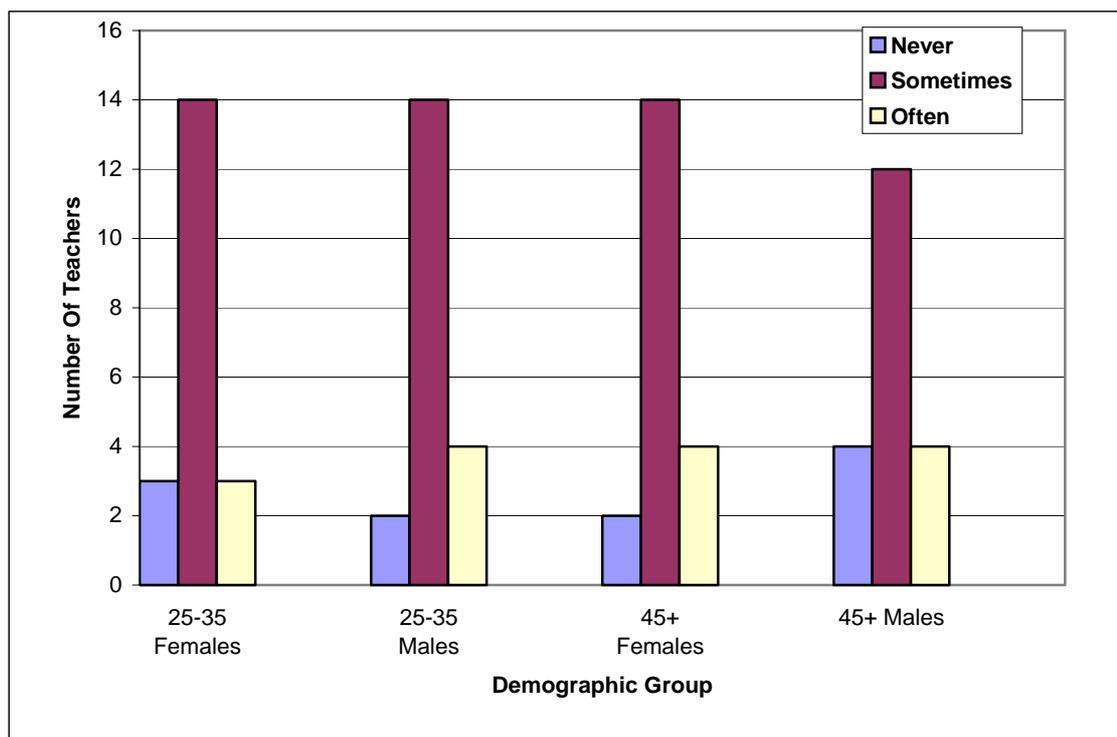
#### **4.4 THE FREQUENCY OF ESOL TEACHERS' TABOO ENGLISH USE IN EVERYDAY CONVERSATION**

The research also surveyed teachers' attitudes towards their own use of Taboo English using a three point scale (1=never, 2= sometimes and 3=often). Teachers were asked to use this scale to assess perceptions of their personal use of Taboo English in daily conversation. This question was designed to determine whether or not females consider themselves to be the guardians of language and avoid taboo language. Results show that in this day and age, taboo words are not only used by prisoners and sailors as the vast majority of both male and female ESOL teachers also use these more colourful terms. As Figure 11 indicates, the use of taboo language by ESOL teachers is more prevalent than expected.



**Figure 11. The Frequency Of Taboo English Use By ESOL Teachers In Everyday Conversation**

The majority (67%) or 54 out of the 80 ESOL teachers admitted to using Taboo English sometimes. Almost a quarter stated that they used taboo words often. In other words, 86% or a total of 69 out of 80 participants reported using taboo language either often or sometimes in daily casual conversation. The remaining 14% of those surveyed claimed that they completely refrained from using Taboo English. The frequency of use by each demographic group is detailed in Figure 12.



**Figure 12. The Frequency Of Taboo English Use In Everyday Conversation By Each Demographic Group**

Figure 12 indicates that the pattern of frequency of use by each demographic group is very similar. In fact, these similarities are quite striking. Overall, an equal number of participants from each demographic group admitted to using taboo words sometimes. Seventy percent of the females reported using this language sometimes. Further analysis of the data revealed that 14 out of 20 (70%) of the participants in each demographic group, with the exception of the 45+ males, reported using taboo words sometimes. A major aspect of interest is that the older males (12 out of 20) reported slightly less use of taboo words than the other demographic groups. This is surprising for two reasons. Firstly, these older males displayed the most tolerant attitude towards a list of 20 Taboo English commonly heard in society. In light of this finding, one might expect this demographic group to have a more liberal personal use of taboo words. Secondly, and of even greater importance is that these older males self-reported a slightly less frequent use of taboo words than their female counterparts. This finding does not support the once widely held view that Taboo English is the domain of males rather than females.

The following results also support the claim that the perception of non-swearing women in society today is only a myth, as almost an equal number of participants from each demographic group admitted to using taboo words often. Eighteen percent of the females and slightly more males (20%) reported using taboo words often. Closer analysis of the data shows that 4 out of 20 (20%) of the participants in each demographic group, with the exception of the 25-35 females, reported using taboo language often in daily conversation. A further aspect of interest relates to those participants in the study who state that they never use taboo words. Thirteen percent of the females reported that they never use taboo words, while slightly more males (15%) claim to never use taboo words. This finding is of interest as, once again, contrary to the literature, the 45+ males appear to have the least tolerance towards Taboo English with 4 out of 20 (20%) of these participants reporting they never use taboo words followed by 3 out of 20 (15%) of the 25-35 females. An equal number of 25-35 males and 45+ females report that they never use taboo words. In fact, only 2 out of 20 participants (10%) from each of these demographic groups state that they completely refrain from using taboo words in everyday speech.

While the number of participants (80) in the current study is relatively small, there is evidence to suggest that these findings do not reflect the patterns of Taboo English use traditionally associated with gender. It seems that the females do not consider themselves to be the guardians of language, nor do they appear to avoid bad or dirty language. Overall, females self-reported using taboo words as frequently and in some instances slightly more often, than their male counterparts. These findings are in contrast to the results of studies conducted by Johnson (1993) who investigated taboo language attitudes of 174 American university students and Selnow (1985) who also conducted research on gender and the attitudes towards bad language by 135 undergraduate American university students. Both researchers concluded that male respondents clearly rated themselves as more frequent users of taboo language than females. However, the findings of this study are in line with a very recent study conducted by Stapleton (2003). Adopting a communities of practice (CoP) approach to investigate swearing as a means of identity production within a group of 30 Irish university students, Stapleton found that males and females reported an equal use of swear words in everyday conversation.

Similarly, the findings of the present study also question the general assumption that males use significantly more taboo language than females is unsupported. Overall, the use of taboo words is a common linguistic practice for both genders. However, there is an indication that in very general terms, the older males in this particular study and the younger females reported a slightly more conservative use of taboo words. Conversely, the 45+ females and 25-35 males self-reported an equally liberal attitude towards their use of taboo words in everyday conversation.

I feel that the issue of taboo words and gender requires further discussion. This use of Taboo English by females today could be interpreted as a salient reversal of traditional female linguistic behaviour. Over the years, the feminist movement has greatly influenced the linguistic habits of females in general. Moreover, during the past four decades, this movement has also been an important contributing factor in the use of taboo language by females today. This is supported by Oliver and Rubin (1975: 195) who investigated gender and Taboo English use and the notion that a woman's feeling of liberation influences her patterns of taboo use. These researchers concluded that women who considered themselves to be liberated used taboo words more frequently than those who felt less liberated.

Taboo words are great gender equalisers and it is possible that females may have adopted the use of taboo words as an assertive strategy in mixed gender conversations. This strategy is supported by Limbrick (1991) who investigated expletive usage in single versus mixed-gender conversations of 6 participants from Dunedin, New Zealand. Limbrick's study (1991) concluded that women use taboo words to ensure they are not marginalised in mixed-gender conversations. In other words, these females, daughters of the feminist movement, have used and it seems continue to use taboo words as they represent an accepted social means of constructing a masculine identity - an identity needed by this generation of females to survive in a man's world. Females appear to be no more inhibited about the production of taboo words than males and would appear that females today are not as concerned about status and prestige as previous generations of females. However, this present study did not address the issue of attitudes towards sexism and feminist issues nor sociocultural variables such as levels of education or past work experience. Thus, this theory can not be substantiated and a further in-depth investigation is required in this area of gender and Taboo English use.

With regard to the L2 classroom, learners need to be aware that Western society is becoming more tolerant towards taboo language and that taboo words are used by speakers of everyday informal conversation. In fact, language learners could encounter native speakers of English who consider this taboo language to be an integral part of their linguistic behaviour. In addition, this study has demonstrated the widely held perception that Taboo English is the habit of the uneducated is unfounded. Therefore, it could be argued that the use of taboo words transcends gender, age and educational background.

It is also important for language learners to know that the gender of both speaker and listener will influence how, when and where Taboo English is introduced into a conversation. However, teachers need to emphasise that the pattern of Taboo English use associated with gender is very complex. Learners may struggle with the concept that taboo words are not only the domain of males and that females are equally likely to use this language in everyday conversation. While it may be acceptable for English speakers to use taboo language in certain situations, this may not necessarily be the case for learners from other cultures. A discussion comparing the taboo use by different genders from various countries in the L2 classroom could provide teachers with great insight into potential situations where the use of taboo language may result in intercultural miscommunication disasters.

The following section investigates why ESOL teachers employ taboo words and demonstrates how the use of taboo words to express anger, create solidarity, express emphasis or express a serious insult is equally prominent in male and female linguistic behaviour.

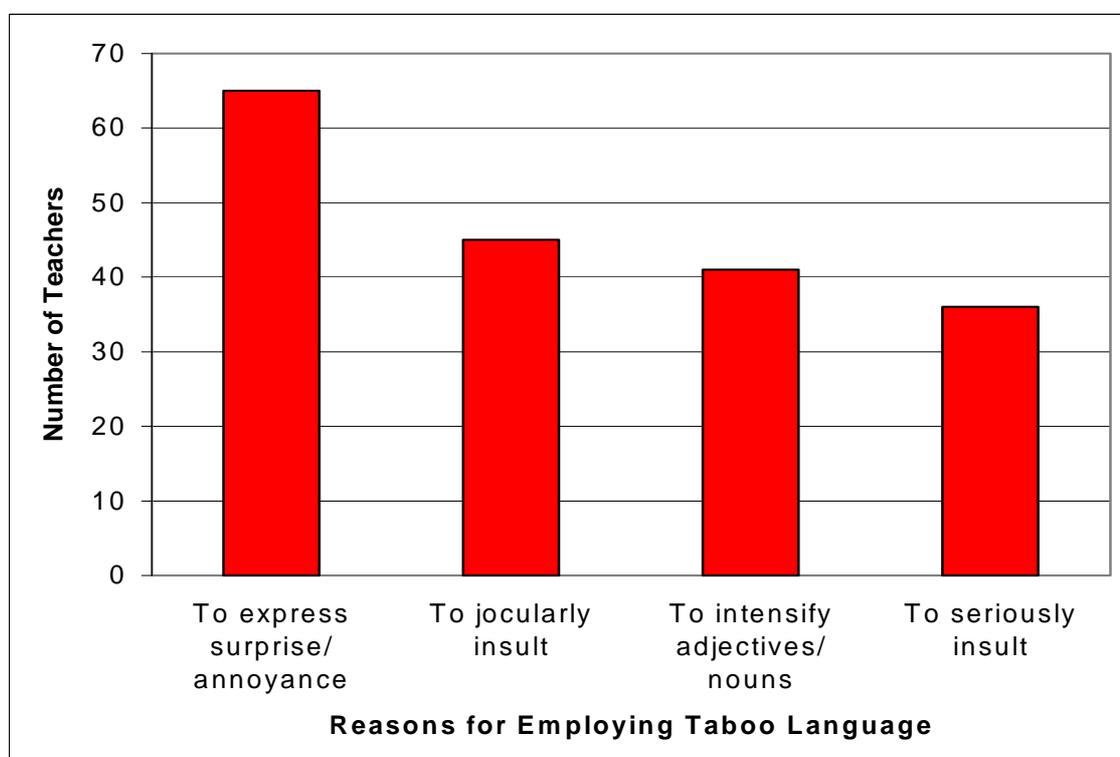
#### **4.5 REASONS ESOL TEACHERS USE TABOO ENGLISH WORDS IN EVERYDAY CONVERSATION**

The study also aimed to investigate teachers' perception about why they employed taboo language in everyday conversation. In addition, an attempt was made to see if there were any significant demographic differences in the reasons speakers choose to

employ taboo language. Teachers were asked to assess their reason(s) for using taboo words from the following four functions.

- a) to express surprise, annoyance or frustration
- b) to express a jocular insult
- c) to intensify adjectives or nouns (for emphasis)
- d) to express a serious insult.

These functions were adapted from a study conducted by Bayard and Krishnayya (2001) examining gender variation in the expletive usage of 11 students from the University of Otago in New Zealand. The findings are summarised in Figure 13.



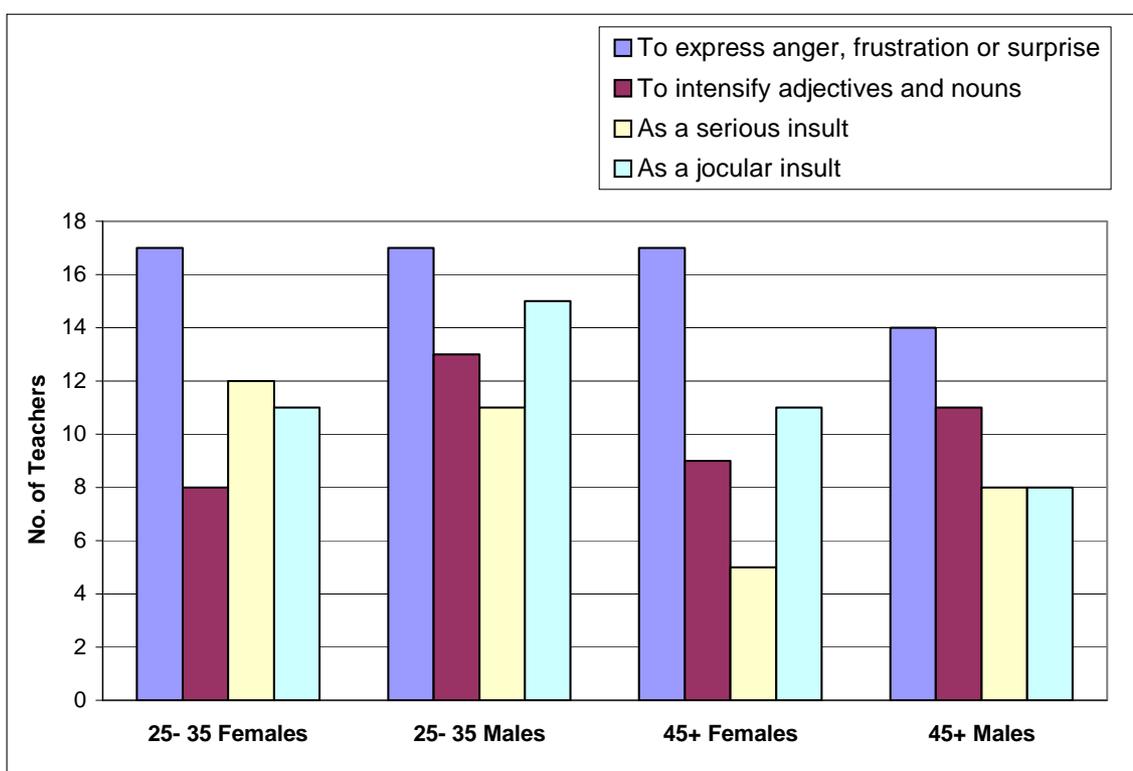
**Figure 13. Reasons ESOL Teachers Use Taboo English Words**

The first clear conclusion from these findings is that native speakers of English use taboo words in a variety of situations. At least half of the teachers in this study employed Taboo English for more than one function. These responses clearly demonstrate the versatility of taboo language and ultimately the complexity surrounding its use. Analysis revealed that the majority of teachers (65 out of 80) reported that they most commonly use taboo words to express surprise, annoyance or frustration. This result is in line with one of the few studies (Chen, 1999) to investigate taboo language

and sociocultural factors. Surveying the taboo use of 97 residents, randomly selected from a telephone directory in Southern California, he concluded that the highest frequency of taboo use was when speakers felt angry and frustrated. These findings are also similar to those of Bayard and Krishnaya (2001) who found that speakers frequently used taboo words to express surprise or frustration.

A further consideration of the frequencies indicates that, generally, a similar number of teachers reported the use of taboo words for the remaining three functions. However, the use of taboo words to express a jocular insult was considered to be the second most common reason by 45 of the 80 teachers. Slightly fewer teachers, 41 out of 80, uttered taboo words for emphasis. In contrast, the use of taboo words to express a serious insult was regarded as the least common reason, with only 36 out of 80 teachers employing taboo words for this purpose.

Figure 14 details the functions of Taboo English use by each demographic group, revealing that gender and age are key reasons for such use.



**Figure 14. Reasons ESOL Teachers Use Taboo English Words By Demographic Group**

It is apparent from Figure 14 that there is wide agreement, with almost an equal number of participants from each demographic, reporting the use of taboo words to express surprise, annoyance or frustration as the most common reason for using taboo language. Closer analysis of the demographic variables reveals the following patterns. Out of 20 participants, 17 from each demographic group, with the exception of the 45+ males, employ taboo words to express surprise, annoyance or frustration. Slightly fewer older males (14 out of 20) report using taboo words to express surprise, annoyance or frustration. However, on the whole, there are little gender and age differences in the use of taboo words to express surprise, annoyance or frustration. These findings support Stapleton's (2003) findings where an equal number of women and men identified anger as a reason for their use of taboo language.

However, a different picture emerges with regard to the use of taboo words to express a jocular insult. Just over half (11 out of 20) of both the younger and older females employed taboo words in good humour to express a jocular insult. Closer analysis of the results reveals that age has a greater influence on the use of taboo words to express a jocular insult by the males in the study. The younger males (15 out of 20) reported the most frequent use of Taboo English to express an insult in a joking manner. Conversely, the older 45+ males reported using taboo words the least often to express a jocular insult with less than half (8 out of 20) stating they use taboo words for this purpose. Thus, there was little gender difference with regard to the use of taboo words to express a jocular insult with an equal number of females and males employing taboo words for this purpose. However, the younger male participants in the study demonstrated the greatest enthusiasm for using taboo words for this purpose.

The gender difference in attitudes towards the use of taboo words to intensify adjectives and nouns (for emphasis) proved to be important. Once again, the 25-35 males (13 out of 20) self reported the most frequent use of taboo words for emphasis, followed by the older males (11 out of 20). However, females displayed less enthusiasm with just under half using taboo words to intensify adjectives and nouns. The younger females (8 out of 20) used taboo words for emphasis the least often, followed by the 45+ females (9 out of 20). Gender emerged as a principal variable of difference, with clearly more males than females favouring the use of Taboo English for this function.

However, these demographic patterns were not reflected in the use of taboo words to express a serious insult. Interestingly, the younger males and females showed a very similar pattern of use with the younger females (12 out of 20) reporting the most common use of taboo language for this purpose, followed by the younger males (11 out of 20). Age emerged as an important variable of difference with fewer of the older participants using taboo words for this purpose. The difference is quite considerable. In fact, just under half of the older males (8 out of 20) employ the use of Taboo English to express a serious insult while the 45+ females demonstrated the least enthusiasm with only 5 out of 20 stating that they use taboo words for this reason.

These findings are far from straightforward. There is considerable variation in the attitudes of each demographic group towards the use of taboo words for the various functions. At this point, it would be useful to summarise the findings thus far. Regardless of age or gender, participants generally reported an equal use of taboo words to express surprise, annoyance and frustration. The younger males in this study use taboo words to express a jocular insult more frequently than other groups. Conversely, the older males use taboo words to express a jocular insult the least frequently while an equal number of females reported using taboo words for this purpose. It is also evident that males, the younger males in particular, use taboo words for emphasis more frequently than females. Younger teachers also use taboo words to express a serious insult more often than their older counterparts. The older females use taboo words to express a serious insult the least frequently.

Overall, the findings indicate that the younger teachers are slightly more prolific users of taboo language than their older counterparts. One of the recurring themes is the frequent use of Taboo English by the younger males in the study who generally self reported using Taboo English the most often. On the whole, slightly more males than females reported employing taboo words for these functions. Interestingly, the older females and males displayed surprisingly similar Taboo English behaviour with almost an exact number of each gender using taboo words for these functions. Again, these results do not support the common claim in the literature that males generally employ taboo words more frequently than females for a variety of functions. Overall, there is little gender difference in reasons for using taboo words. This finding slightly contradicts Johnson (1993: 8) who concluded that more men than women reported using

taboo words for insulting people, emphasising a point, signifying friendship and using “taboo language in a creative, playful way.”

Rather the evidence suggests that age rather than gender has a greater influence on the speaker’s use of Taboo English. However, it is important not to over generalise. If, there is a “bottom line” to the findings of this question, it must be that the use of Taboo English to express a variety of functions is not the exclusive domain of males. Instead, the use of taboo words to express anger, create solidarity, to express emphasis or to express a serious insult is equally prominent in both male and female linguistic behaviour. However, it seems evident that young males employ taboo words the most frequently, particularly with regard to the use of this language to express a jocular insult and for emphasis.

One possible explanation for the frequent use of taboo words in the study by the younger males could be a reflection of what Pilkington (1992) describes as “mateship culture”. “Mateship culture” generally refers to the use of a taboo words by speakers in an abusive manner to create and enforce group solidarity and demonstrate masculinity. This is further supported by Hay (1994) who examined jocular abuse in mixed-gender group interaction. Hay concluded that jocular abuse offers a strategy to express group membership and solidarity. Furthermore, she also emphasises that those who are most integrated into the group, regardless of gender, are the most frequent targets of abuse. However, the use of taboo words by each demographic group is very complex and in order to provide an explanation to account for these differences, requires future in-depth research would be required.

These results have shown that native speakers of English consider these words to be an important part of their linguistic repertoire. However, it is obvious that the functional use of Taboo English is very complex. These findings add further weight to the argument that L2 learners need explicit instruction about the complex functional use of Taboo English. Learners need to be taught that these words can be used to express a range of feelings in different situations. They can be used to express exclamations of surprise or annoyance or displeasure, to express jocular insults, for emphasis and even to express violent refusals or insults. These words are an integral part of spoken language and can also be used to indicate equality between speakers and add a comical aspect to speech.

Learners need to be aware that these taboo words can be used to mark social distance and non-member alienation. Paradoxically, native speakers also use taboo words to mark social solidarity indicating friendship. Learners may find it ironic that the same words used to express a serious insult can also function as terms of endearment. Native speakers are aware when Taboo English is being used without attached negativity. Taboo words can be used in good humour to express a jocular insult. Paradoxically, they can also be used in an abusive and aggressive manner to express a serious insult. Thus, it is vital that L2 students are aware of the differences between the use of taboo words to express a serious insult and a jocular insult. A serious insult is meant to cause offence. Conversely, a jocular insult serves to create and reinforce group solidarity and learners need to know that speakers are not expected to take offense (Kuiper 1991). Furthermore, it is important that second language learners know that the use of taboo words is also dependent on the formality of the situation. As Hay (1994) points out the use of jocular insults in conversation shows a closeness between speakers. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to be too polite to someone we know and equally inappropriate to abuse someone we don't know.

This section has focused primarily on why speakers choose to use taboo words. The following section now discusses the words participants employ to express these functions.

#### **4.6 TABOO ENGLISH WORDS USED BY ESOL TEACHERS IN EVERYDAY CONVERSATION**

Participants were given a list of 24 taboo words and asked to select the words they used to express themselves in the following situations. These functions were adapted from Bayard and Krishynna's New Zealand study (2001) investigating gender and taboo language use in New Zealand.

- a) to express anger, frustration or surprise
- b) to express a jocular insult
- c) to intensify adjectives or nouns (for emphasis)
- d) to express a serious insult

The words in the list were similar to those used earlier in the questionnaire to investigate teachers' attitudes towards the offensiveness of taboo words frequently heard in society today. Participants were also encouraged to add to the list taboo words that they themselves also commonly used to express themselves in each of these four situations. The aim of this question was three-fold. Firstly, it was designed to find out what words were most often used, with particular focus on the way in which the word 'fuck' was used by speakers. Furthermore, the question aimed to explore any differences in the use of these taboo words by each demographic group.

Secondly, influential studies conducted by Risch (1987) and de Klerk (1992) have illustrated that there are more derogatory labels used to describe females than males. The list also included words that linguistically discriminate against males such as, 'arsehole', 'bastard', 'dick' and 'jerk' and 'wanker' as well as 'bitch', 'cunt' and 'mother-fucker', words that refer to females in a derogatory manner. These words were included in the list in order to investigate whether the male participants in the study used language that is derogatory to women more frequently than the female participants.

Finally, the ESOL teachers in this study are of mainly European decent, (Pakeha New Zealanders) and the addition of the following Maori words was an attempt to examine the participants' familiarity with these taboo Maori words which are commonly heard in everyday conversation by some sectors of society in New Zealand.

- a) teke (vagina) (used in a joking manner)
- b) teko (shit) ( used in a joking manner)
- c) hangi pants (slut) (used as a serious insult).

The results showed that, on the whole, males used Taboo English slightly more frequently than females. However, analysis of taboo words and phrases listed by each demographic group showed that females used considerably more taboo words than the literature would lead to us believe. These results contradict Lakoff's (1975) claim that the stronger Taboo English words are the domain of males and the weaker taboo words are the property of women. Each demographic reported a wide range of colourful taboo phrases used in every day conversation, ranging from phrases such as 'cunt of a thing', 'arsewipe', 'pussy', 'pillock', 'bullocks', 'silly old fart' to 'son of a thousand Arab armpits'.

While there is a noticeable marked gender difference in the use of ‘cunt’, and ‘mother-fucker’, overall there is also little difference in the strength of taboo words employed by each gender. The females in this study clearly did use taboo language during everyday conversation – in some cases as frequently as males. However, the older females, in particular, listed milder forms of taboo language such as the terms: ‘for God’s sake’, ‘God damn it!’ ‘Damn!’ ‘Dumbass!’, ‘What the hell!’ ‘load of crap’, ‘bum’ and ‘sod’.

Conversely, the males listed a greater variety of words perhaps considered to be slightly more offensive such as: ‘bastard face’, ‘shit head’, ‘shit for brains’, ‘thick as pig shit’, ‘a real foreskin’, ‘dickless’, ‘dickwad’, ‘can’t tell shit from clay’, ‘a wank fest’, ‘balls’ and last but not least, the phrase ‘a perambulating arsehole’. However, it is important to point out that males also listed mild phrases such as: ‘holy hell’, ‘gee’, ‘crikey’ and ‘dork brain’, ‘thickwit’, ‘a munter’ and ‘balls’.

These findings are in line with research conducted in New Zealand by Bayard and Krishnayya (2001) and Limbrick (1991) investigating Taboo English use in single versus mixed-gender conversations. Bayard and Krishnayya (2001: 12) found that females are increasingly breaking rules surrounding stereotypical male and female Taboo English use. They concluded that, although females used slightly fewer taboo words than males, there was little gender difference in the strength of the taboo words used “although only females appear to use those at the mildest end of the spectrum.”

Limbrick (1991) also found that while males used bad language slightly more than females in single-gender conversations, the difference was not significant. Contrary to Lakoff’s theory (1975), the results of Limbrick’s study not only showed that females swore more frequently than males in mixed-sex conversations, but that they also used far stronger taboo words when interacting with males. According to Limbrick (1991), this increased use of taboo words by females is a strategy employed to ensure they are not dominated or marginalised during mixed-gender conversations.

Both researchers concluded that the use of Taboo English was a symbol of both power and solidarity and no longer the exclusive privilege of males alone. The results of the present study add weight to this claim. However, I also propose that while males and females generally use Taboo English with nearly the same frequency, the difference lies

in the use of specific words such as ‘fuck’, ‘cunt’ and ‘mother-fucker’. The older females for example, do not necessarily use Taboo English less frequently than the other demographic group, but instead tend to use the less offensive taboo terms. This is further supported by an earlier result in the current study (See Section 4.4) investigating teachers’ personal use of Taboo English in everyday conversation. Results showed that the older females reported using taboo words as liberally as the younger males in the present study. Table 2 presents the findings of the 8 most commonly employed words by speakers for the four functions.

**Table 2. The Top 8 Taboo Words Most Commonly Used By ESOL Teachers**

<b>Ranking</b>	<b>To express anger, frustration or surprise</b>	<b>To express a jocular insult</b>	<b>To intensify adjectives and nouns (for emphasis)</b>	<b>To express a serious insult</b>
1	shit	piss off (+ variants)	bloody	arsehole & fuck (+ variants)
2	hell	fuck (+ variants)	fuck (+ variants)	bastard & bitch
3	bugger & crap	bastard	bastard & shit	piss off (+ variants)
4	bullshit & fuck	wanker	hell	dick and wanker
5	bummer	bitch	bullshit & mother-fucker	crap and cunt
6	Jesus Christ	dick	bummer	bullshit, shit and up yours
7	piss off	arsehole	jerk	mother-fucker
8	bloody	bugger & bullshit	bitch	bloody

The first conclusion is that both males and females use a wide range of Taboo English words in casual conversation. From Table 2, we can see that the ESOL teachers considered 19 particular taboo words to be an important part of their linguistic repertoire. Certain functions also saw participants use more words than others. ESOL

teachers listed the greatest range of words (15) to express a serious insult and an equal number of words (10) to express anger, frustration or surprise and intensify adjectives and nouns. Slightly fewer words (8) were listed to express a jocular insult. Analysis of data also revealed that overall, speakers favoured the use of either two or three particular words to express themselves in each situation.

The majority of participants reported using many of the taboo words on the list in more than one circumstance. Only 4 of the 19 words in the table, 'Jesus Christ', 'jerk', 'cunt' and 'up yours', were used for only one purpose. The remaining 15 words were used by speakers in more than one situation. This in turn demonstrates the versatility of Taboo English. 'Bastard', 'bitch', 'bloody', 'piss off' and 'bullshit' proved to be very popular and were employed by speakers in three situations. 'Shit', 'hell', 'bugger', 'wanker', 'dick', 'crap', 'bummer', 'mother-fucker' and 'arsehole', were used in two situations. Described by Kidman (1983) as the new 'bloody', it is perhaps not surprising that variants of the word 'fuck' such as 'fucking', 'fuckin' and 'fucken' proved to be most versatile Taboo English word on the list used by participants in all four situations. (The use of 'fuck' will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.)

There was wide agreement by participants regarding the choice of the two most frequently used words to express anger, frustration, surprise or annoyance. More than three quarters of those surveyed considered the word 'shit' (79%) to be the most valuable word to vent anger or surprise followed by the rather innocuous 'hell' at 64%. However, there was a broad range of opinions about the remaining words with almost an equal number of participants favouring the use of 'bugger' and 'crap' at 56%, 'bullshit' and 'fuck' (55%), 'bummer' at 54%, 'Jesus Christ' (39%) and 'piss off' at 38%. 'Bloody' (29%) was considered to be 8<sup>th</sup> most commonly employed word to express anger or surprise.

There was wide agreement that 'shit' was the most common word used to vent anger or surprise. In fact, at least three quarters of the participants from each demographic group considered 'shit' to be the most appropriate word in this situation. All groups, with the exception of the 25+ females, regarded 'bugger' to be the second or third most useful word used in this situation. However, this was not the case for the younger females in the study who considered the more offensive word 'fuck' to be the second on the list followed by 'bastard' with 'bugger' in ninth place. One of the older female teachers

commented on the use of 'fuck' and 'shit' and stressed that her choice of word depended on her degree of anger:

*"Shit is used when I am frustrated and the "F" word only when I am extremely angry."*

The older females and younger males used the rather innocuous word 'bummer' to express surprise and anger more frequently than the other groups. This is interesting because the word 'bummer' is generally regarded as the language of the younger generation. Results also showed that males clearly used 'Jesus Christ' more often than females with the younger females displaying the least enthusiasm for using this word to express anger or surprise.

However, there was little consensus by participants regarding the most common words used to express a jocular insult. Overall variants of 'piss' such as 'piss off' was found to be the most popular term by 44% of those surveyed. In general, the second to sixth words on the list were considered to be appropriate by a very similar number of participants with variants of 'fuck' (35%), 'bastard' (34%), 'wanker' (31%), 'bitch' (28%) followed by 'dick' at 26% 'arsehole' (23%) and 'bugger' (21%) were listed less frequently and appeared in seventh and eighth place.

There is one notable feature in regard to demographic patterns. Each gender and age group listed a different word as their first choice to express a jocular insult. The younger females rated 'piss off' as the most common word while their younger male counterparts favoured 'fuck'. The older participants in this study also shared differing opinions with the older females reporting 'dick' to be their first choice while the 45+ males favoured the word 'bastard'. However, there was slightly more consensus regarding words in second and third position. The younger females and older males considered 'fuck' to be the second most suitable word while the younger males and older females preferred to use 'piss off'. The females in the study agreed that 'bastard' was the third most useful word to express a jocular insult while the males favoured 'piss off'.

It is also clear that participants clearly favoured the use of two words to intensify adjectives and nouns. There was wide agreement by each demographic group that

'bloody' (61%) was the best choice of word in this situation. Variants of 'fuck' at 40% also proved to be popular. At this point, it is necessary to stress that participants most commonly cited the use of 'fucking' to intensify adjectives and nouns as illustrated by the following comments:

*"Some people use 'fucking' as an adjective for emphasis in every sentence. It's not considered anything specially terrible these days. Where it once would have shocked – today it's just another word."*

*"I use fucking to intensify adjectives usually in a verbal narrative (story-telling) i.e. It was so fucking loud. The movie was fucking shitty. The food was fucking awful."*

Far fewer participants employed the remaining six words on the list with 'bastard' and 'shit' (11%), 'hell' (10%), and 'bullshit' and 'mother-fucker' at 8%. 'Bummer' at 6% followed by 'jerk' (5%) and 'bitch' (4%) being used even less frequently. The following demographic patterns can be observed. Results showed that regardless of age, a similar number of females and males reported employing 'bloody' for emphasis. Participants from each demographic group also cited 'fuck' as the second most frequently used in this situation. Overall, males also reported using a greater variety of words for emphasis than did females. This difference is particularly evident when comparing the responses of the younger teachers. While the 25-35 males reported using 13 words to intensify a noun or adjective, the 25-35 females, on the other hand, reported employing only four words on the list of 22.

There is also little consensus regarding the eight Taboo English words used to express a serious insult. It is apparent that participants have differing opinions on the most useful words to express a serious insult. 'Arsehole' and 'fuck' (39%) were regarded as the number one choice of words, closely followed by 'bastard' and 'bitch' (36%) in second position. 'Piss off' (28%) appeared slightly down the order in third place, followed by 'wanker' and 'dick' (21%) in 4<sup>th</sup> place equal. Sixteen percent of those surveyed rated 'crap' as well as the most offensive word in the English language, 'cunt' to be the fifth most appropriate word to use to express a serious insult. Fewer teachers used 'bullshit', 'shit' and 'up yours' (13%), 'mother-fucker' (11%) and 'bloody' (6%) was considered to be the eighth most suitable word.

It is immediately evident that the 45+ females used taboo words to express a serious insult the least frequently. Conversely, the younger females reported using the stronger taboo words the most frequently. The older male and female ESOL teachers agreed that 'arsehole' was the best word to express a serious insult, while the younger teachers were in agreement that 'bitch' is the second most useful word in this situation.

Closer analysis of data also revealed that teachers tried to avoid a number of Taboo words. Sixty five percent of those surveyed reported that they never used the word 'cunt' in everyday conversation, followed by 'mother-fucker' (59%), 'Jesus Christ' (56%) and 'up yours' (55%). It is hardly surprising that a majority of participants reported never using 'cunt', 'mother-fucker' and 'up yours' as earlier results showed participants considered these words to be three of the top eight most offensive words in the English language.

However, the finding that more than half of the ESOL teachers avoided saying 'Jesus Christ' on any occasion is very interesting, considering that this word did not feature in the earlier list of eight words ESOL teachers regarded as the most offensive in the English language. The gender difference in attitudes towards the use of 'Jesus Christ' proved to be relevant. Three quarters of the females and just under half of the male ESOL teachers avoided saying 'Jesus Christ' in any situation. These figures support an earlier finding in this study which found that overall, females demonstrated higher disapproval levels towards the use of this religious term when heard in casual conversation than did the males in the study.

These results have demonstrated the complexity and diversity of teachers' attitudes towards taboo words in casual conversation. In some situations, participants indicated similar behaviour. Yet, in other situations, there were definite differences in attitudes towards the choice of words between the younger and older generations. Further research is required to investigate the reasons that may account for these differing attitudes.

The next section examines the use of 'fuck' by ESOL teachers and illustrates distinct gender differences in the reasons participants use this word and discusses the use of 'fuck' to create solidarity.

#### 4.6.1 The use of ‘Fuck’ by ESOL teachers in everyday conversation

The Taboo English word ‘fuck’ and variants such as ‘fucking’, ‘fuckin’, and ‘fucked’ noticeably proved to be the most popular word on the list of 24 words. The semantic versatility of ‘fuck’ was amply illustrated by the diverse combination of phrases listed by participants. These phrases are presented in the Table 3. Table 4 details the reasons each demographic use the taboo word ‘fuck’.

**Table 3. Phrases Listed By ESOL Teachers Using ‘Fuck’**

‘F’ word	Fuck off	Fuck yes	Fucking hell
Oh, fuck	Fuck off and die	Fuck yeah	Fucking fantastic
What the fuck?	Get fucked	Don’t fuck with me	Fuck. He’s just a bastard.
Fuck all	Fuck you	Did you see what that fucker just did?	Fucking idiot
Fuck off	Fuck no	Fucken wanker	Fuckwit
Fuck up	No fucking way	Abso-fucken-lutely	Fucking mother-fucker

**Table 4. Reasons ESOL Teachers Use ‘Fuck’ By Age And Gender**

Reason	Age		Gender	
	25-35	45+	Female	Male
To express anger, frustration or surprise	27	17	22	22
To express a jocular insult	16	11	9	18
To intensify adjectives or nouns (for emphasis)	20	12	13	19
To express a serious insult	21	10	13	18
Total	84	50	57	77

Many participants reported the use of ‘fuck’ with some degree of regularity. In fact, it was generally considered to be the second most appropriate choice of word for self-expression in each situation. This finding is in line with Bayard and Krishynna (2001: 10) who also found that ‘fuck’ and its derivatives were the “expletive of choice for both genders.”

With regard to demographic patterns, the recurring use of ‘fuck’ by both genders also shows that the use of Taboo English is not only the male prerogative. However, overall, males used ‘fuck’ more frequently than females, with the younger males in the study consistently using this word more often than the other demographic groups. Conversely, the older females in the study used ‘fuck’ the least frequently. However, age proved to be the biggest demographic difference. The younger ESOL teachers used ‘fuck’ more often than their older counterparts in each situation. While the 25-35 males used ‘fuck’ the most frequently, it is important to point out that the younger females in the study reported a similar use of ‘fuck’. These results confirmed an earlier finding in the present study (See Section 4.3.3) which revealed that the ESOL teachers perceived ‘fuck’ to be the most frequently used taboo word on a university campus. The fact that the participants expected ‘fuck’ to be the most commonly employed word by young university students indicates that native speakers are aware that Taboo English is becoming more widespread and increasingly used by the younger generation who are using terms such as ‘fuck’ more frequently in both formal and informal contexts.

Furthermore, it is surprising that the younger females in the study used ‘fuck’ more frequently than the older males. The finding once again questions the commonly held stereotype that females are more linguistically conservative than males. Results showed that the age of a speaker influenced their use of ‘fuck’. This taboo word is often considered to be part of the vocabulary of ‘non-standard speech’. Therefore, one might hypothesise that older people use ‘fuck’ less frequently because they consciously or unconsciously pay special attention to their linguistic behaviour (McEnery & Xiao, 2004). On the basis of this data alone, I cannot evaluate this explanation. However, the following comment by a 45+ male supports this hypothesis:

*“As a parent and a teacher I am aware that I am a role model and tend to use a more conservative (but richer??) style of expression”.*

A review of the literature indicates that the conventional functions of ‘fuck’ serve as an expression of exasperation, an insult and an intensifier. This is confirmed by the results of the current study. Overall, responses showed that ‘fuck’ was mainly used by the ESOL teachers in this study to express anger, frustration or surprise. Fewer teachers used ‘fuck’ for emphasis, as a serious insult and less frequently employed to express an insult in a joking manner. Further examination of the results revealed a very definite difference in the way ‘fuck’ was employed in each situation and that it depended on the gender and age of participants. An equal number of males and females reported using ‘fuck’ to express anger, frustration or surprise. This finding is of particular relevance as this is the only situation where there was no difference in the frequency of each gender’s use of ‘fuck’.

However, the gender of speakers did influence the frequency of the use of ‘fuck’ to express an insult in a humorous or playful manner. The results were noticeably different with 50% more males reporting using ‘fuck’ in this situation than females. Furthermore, an equal number of both older and younger males (45%) favoured the use of ‘fuck’, while the 45+ females (10%) showed the least enthusiasm. Similarly, males and the younger males in particular, reported using the word ‘fuck’ for emphasis more frequently than did the females. This is not surprising given that an earlier finding (See Section 4.5) found that the 25-35 males employ taboo words the most frequently to express a jocular insult and for emphasis. While the majority reported the use of ‘fucking’ for emphasis, a number of participants also cited frequently using ‘fuck’ as an infix as in ‘abso-fucking-lutely’ and ‘in-fucking-credible’ for “extra emphasis”.

I feel that several key points need further elaboration. Firstly, a number of the younger males commented that their use of ‘fuck’ depended on their audience. Several pointed out that ‘fuck’ was more frequently employed when in the company of ‘mates having a beer’, supporting the argument that taboo words are used in a playful manner to show group solidarity or what Pilkington (1992) refers to as “mateship culture.” In other words, these speakers used taboo words as a means of identifying themselves as a member of a community of practice and as a way of affirming group culture. The following comment by another young male reflects this:

*“I don’t use bad language in the company of people who are older or younger than me, or people I don’t know well. But swear a lot around males of the same*

*age. It's not even swearing. It's just the way we talk. I also tend not to swear in front of women. Much!"*

The second thing that becomes clear is that the use of 'fuck' by speakers in a joking manner flouts conventional descriptions of polite behaviour and contradicts Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. Telling someone to 'fuck off' or 'fuck up' are clear examples of face threatening speech acts. But, in the case of Taboo English use, it becomes apparent that such face threatening acts (FTA) were not always necessarily regarded as a feature of impoliteness. One could argue that Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory needs to be updated to account for how Taboo English is used as a politeness strategy in everyday conversation. The following comments succinctly illustrate how the use of 'fuck' contradicts the convention of politeness. It is evident that the speakers used 'fuck' as a positive politeness strategy to create solidarity and a signal of in-group membership:

*"I say fuck off when I don't believe someone and I know they're taking the piss out of me. We have a bit of fun!" (25-35 female)*

*"I often use fuck off which really means a friendly version of shut up. (25-35 female)*

These findings are in line with Bayard and Krishynna (2001: 10) who also found that 'fuck' was the expletive of choice for both genders and functioned as "a pragmatic device which not only marks emphasis but expresses solidarity. This is further supported by a more recent study conducted by Holmes et al. (2004) investigating the socio-pragmatic functions of the taboo word 'fuck' and its variants in a New Zealand context. The study was based on recorded authentic spoken data of workers in a New Zealand soap factory. The researchers found that 'fuck' was extensively employed to signal in-group solidarity within a particular Community of Practice. Holmes (2004: 18) explains that, "these men are on such good terms that they can swear at each other, not only with impunity, but with positive affect. Forms of 'fuck' appear to act as markers of solidarity and positive politeness for members of this community of practice."

Finally, in regard to using 'fuck' to express a serious insult, the younger males and females rated themselves as more frequent users of the word 'fuck' than their older

counterparts. The 45+ females used ‘fuck’ as a serious insult the least frequently. This is not surprising as earlier results (See Section 4.5) showed that this demographic group demonstrated the least enthusiasm for using taboo words in general to express a serious insult. It is very interesting that one 25-35 female commented that she made serious insults noticeably more frequently when driving on the road and states that she seldom said serious insults to someone’s face. ‘What a fucking asshole!’ and “Did you see what that fucker just did?”

The following section investigates ESOL teachers’ use of gender biased words in conversation. Hay (1994) claims that men use taboo words as an opportunity to express their power over women by drawing attention to the women’s sexuality. Thus, one could then hypothesise that more men would use terms that are derogatory to women more frequently than females. Analysis reveals that there are marked gender differences in the frequency of usage of the two words considered to be the most offensive in the English language – ‘cunt’ and ‘mother-fucker’.

#### **4.6.2 The use of gender biased words by ESOL teachers in everyday conversation**

Table 5 presents the findings of the derogatory words used by the demographic groups in each of the following four functions. The words are ranked in order of frequency.

- a) to express anger, frustration or surprise
- b) to express a jocular insult
- c) to intensify adjectives or nouns (for emphasis)
- d) to express a serious insult

**Table 5. Discriminatory Words Used By ESOL Teachers By Age, Gender And Ranking**

Ranking	Females		Males	
	25-35	45+	25-35	45+
1	bastard	bastard	mother-fucker	bastard
2	wanker & bitch	bitch & dick & arsehole	bastard	wanker
3	arsehole	jerk & wanker	bitch	arsehole
4	dick	cunt & mother-fucker	wanker	bitch
5	jerk		arsehole	dick & jerk
6	cunt		dick	cunt
7	mother-fucker		cunt	mother-fucker
8			jerk	

It can be seen that females do use taboo words that refer to males in a derogatory manner, echoing results obtained by Risch (1987) and de Klerk (1992) who concluded that women are familiar with and actually use a wide range of terms to describe males. The following table shows that while some taboo words are used by a similar number of males and females, certain terms evoked notably different responses from each gender.

**Table 6. The Frequency Of Discriminatory Words Used By ESOL Teachers By Age And Gender**

Discriminatory Word	Age		Gender	
	25-35	45+	Female	Male
bastard	46	38	38	46
bitch	41	28	30	39
wanker	37	30	29	38
arsehole	35	30	29	36
dick	33	26	28	31
jerk	21	25	19	27
mother-fucker	25	7	1	32
cunt	16	12	3	25

Several observations can be made from Table 6. Firstly, overall, ‘bastard’ proved to be the most frequently used word followed by ‘bitch’, ‘wanker’, ‘arsehole’, ‘dick’, ‘jerk’, ‘mother-fucker’ and ‘cunt’ in eighth place. It is not surprising that ‘mother-fucker’ and ‘cunt’ are used the least frequently given that earlier findings (See Section 4.2) showed that participants considered these two words to be the most offensive words in the English language today. However, the frequency of use of the terms ‘dick’ and ‘jerk’ is interesting as teachers reported using these words relatively infrequently compared to the terms ‘bitch’ and ‘bastard’. It could be argued that the term ‘jerk’, is more frequently used in American than in New Zealand English. Furthermore, perhaps the participants considered these rather innocuous words to be out-of-date, and thus, did not commonly use them in any of the four situations. The following comment from one participant lends support to this argument:

*“Words like jerk and dick are becoming old-fashioned so therefore used less. They just don’t have any strength to them anymore.”*

With regard to demographic variables, a number of interesting features emerged. Firstly, the males and females in this study clearly showed different patterns of use for

the words 'cunt' and 'mother-fucker'. The taboo word 'cunt' was employed 2% of the time by the younger females in the study. The older females completely avoided using this language under any circumstances. In contrast, males reported using 'cunt' 15% of the time. Further analysis of the data revealed that both the younger and older males reported a very similar frequency of use of this word and most commonly employed 'cunt' as a serious insult. These findings are in line Stapleton's study (2003) which adopted a community of practice approach to investigate the taboo use of a group of 30 Irish undergraduate 'drinking' friends. Stapleton found that only one out of the fifteen females in the study reported regularly using 'cunt', whereas 13 out of 15 males reported using this offensive language regularly.

An even more considerable gender divide was evident with regard to the use of 'mother-fucker'. The female ESOL teachers employed this word even less frequently than 'cunt'. Conversely, 'mother-fucker' was employed more frequently than 'cunt' by the male ESOL teachers. Analysis showed that this offensive word was used in only one of the four situations by a 25-35 female ESOL teachers (0.6% of the time). Once again, the older females were unanimous in their contention that they did not use this term at all. In contrast, the males in the study reported that they used 'mother-fucker' on 32 occasions (20% of the time). In addition, age also emerged as an important variable with the younger males using the word the most frequently (16% of the time). While the older males mainly used this word to express a jocular insult, the younger males used 'mother-fucker' in all four situations.

However, a very different pattern emerged regarding the ESOL teachers' use of the word 'bastard'. Each demographic group reported using it 29% of the time with the exception of the older females in the study who used it slightly less frequently (19% of the time). It is important to emphasise that 'bastard' was the only word used a similar number of times by each demographic group. The females in the study favoured the use of 'bastard' as a serious insult, while the males and the younger males in particular, used this word in a range of situations.

The word 'bitch' was most commonly employed as a serious insult. Age proved to be an important variable. The younger participants used 'bitch' as a serious insult more frequently than their older counterparts. Perhaps not surprisingly, the older females

reported the least frequent use of this word. However, the younger females reported a slightly greater frequency of use of the word 'bitch' than the older males.

A similar trend is evident in regard to the use of 'arsehole' and 'wanker'. Participants clearly most commonly employed both of the words as serious insults. As expected, the older females demonstrated the least frequent use of the words. Once again, the younger female counterparts reported using 'arsehole' and 'wanker' as frequently as the males in this study.

While it is not possible to over generalise, it is fair to say that overall, men do use taboo words that are derogatory to women more frequently than females. However, further explanation is required. The patterns of use of the taboo words 'cunt' and 'mother-fucker' by the male and female speakers is notably different. Clearly males used these two words that refer to females in a derogatory manner more frequently than did the females in the study. Perhaps the simplest explanation for this finding is that females world wide despise the derogatory images these two words convey of women and the females in this study are no exception.

It was also particularly evident that the younger females used taboo words as frequently, and in some cases more often than the older males. Therefore, in view of this finding, it is clear that age rather than gender was the key variable in women's use of taboo language. This finding is supported by a study conducted some 30 years ago by Oliver and Rubin (1975: 195) investigating gender and Taboo English. Oliver and Rubin also stressed that age was a very important variable in women's use of taboo language and noted that overall, younger females had a more liberal approach to using taboo words than their older female counterparts. These results have also confirmed the researcher's intuitive perception that derogatory words are most often used as serious insults in everyday conversation. Therefore, one could infer that the most serious insults are those that attack a speaker's femininity or masculinity.

#### **4.6.3 The use of Maori taboo words by ESOL teachers in everyday conversation**

The findings of the ESOL teachers' use of the three Maori taboo words 'teke', 'teko' and 'hangi pants' demonstrated clear differences. However, before these results are presented and discussed, it is necessary to revisit the nationalities of the participants in the current study. Twenty one out of the 80 participants were either born in Britain, Australia, America or South Africa. The remaining 75% of participants were born in New Zealand.

Results showed that in short, 99% of the ESOL teachers in this study reported that they did not employ these Maori taboo words in everyday conversation. Closer analysis revealed that none of the 80 ESOL teachers reported using the Maori words 'teke' or 'teko' on any occasion. However, one of the older New Zealand females reported using the word 'hangi pants' in its conventional sense - as a serious insult.

It is not surprising that those ESOL teachers born outside of New Zealand are not familiar with these Maori swear words. However, I would have expected a slightly greater frequency of use of these Maori words by the New Zealand born ESOL teachers. However, comments by the New Zealanders questioning the meaning of the Maori swear words strongly indicated that on the whole, teachers appeared unfamiliar with these terms. On the basis of this finding, one could speculate that that Maori are under represented in the field of ESOL. However, the present study did not ask participants for details about their ethnicity. Therefore, further research is required in the area of ESOL teaching and the ethnicity of ESOL teachers to either substantiate or disprove this claim.

Finally, in terms of the wider pedagogical implications of these findings, it is important for language learners to know that native speakers use a wide range of Taboo English words in casual conversation. These words are on a continuum of offensiveness and extend from 'mild' taboo words such as 'hell' to the maximally taboo words 'cunt' and 'mother-fucker'. It is also important that L2 learners know that taboo words are more commonly used figuratively rather than literally. For example, it is likely that when a speaker says the word 'shit', s/he is not referring to faeces but rather using this word to express surprise, anger or frustration. In addition, learners need to be able to distinguish the difference between slang and swear words.

Furthermore, learners also need to know that some words are more commonly used in certain situations. The results indicated that 'shit' is frequently used by speakers to vent anger, frustration or surprise while 'piss off' is often used to express a jocular insult. 'Bloody' is frequently used to intensify a noun or adjective while the words 'cunt', 'mother-fucker;' 'bastard', 'bitch' 'arsehole', and 'wanker' are often used to express a serious insult. Teachers also need to stress that the use of Taboo English as a serious insult is more powerful than when used for emphasis.

The results of the current study (See Section 4.6.2) have also demonstrated that native speakers and younger speakers in particular, use the taboo word 'fuck(ing)' frequently in natural conversation. The Collins Cobuild English Dictionary for advanced learners advises that 'fuck' is a rude and offensive word which should be avoided (Sinclair, 2001: 635 in Daly et al. 2004). However, this explanation is far from satisfactory. 'Fuck' can be used to express a range of feelings including frustration, anger and even indicate friendship. Moreover, there are different definitions of polite behaviour in different societies and teachers need to address the complicated concept of how taboo words such as 'fuck' serve to create solidarity and a signal of in-group membership.

'Fuck' can be used in every part of speech and understanding this semantic versatility can be problematic for the second language learner. Learners need to know that taboo English is rule governed like any other form of natural language and speakers who use Taboo English do so according to the grammar rules. Second language learners need explicit instruction on how 'fuck' often combines morphologically and syntactically with other words in interesting ways including infixes such as 'abso-fucking-lutely' and 'in-fucking-credible' which are used for extra emphasis.

It is vital that learners are aware that the words 'cunt' and 'mother-fucker' convey negative images of women and these two words are seldom used by females in conversation. Teachers could also inform learners that derogatory words are frequently used as insults by native speakers. There are multiple meanings and interpretations for the use of taboo words. The subtleties surrounding the use of taboo words may be obvious to the native speaker. However, it can be almost impossible for the L2 learner to recognise these distinctions without direct instruction.

#### **4.7 SUMMARY OF TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS TABOO ENGLISH IN SOCIETY**

- The ESOL teachers are of the belief that society is becoming more tolerant towards taboo language and the media has been influential in changing public attitude towards the acceptability of certain words in the English language.
- Participants suggest that the use of taboo language is almost a part of “Kiwi culture”. New Zealand is an informal nation and this view is reflected in the informal vocabulary used in everyday Kiwi English.
- Participants considered Taboo English to be an important part of their linguistic repertoire and use a wide range of taboo words in casual conversation. The vast majority of both male and female ESOL teachers (86%) admitted to using taboo words either often or sometimes in every day conversation.
- The findings of this study do not reflect the patterns of Taboo English use traditionally associated with gender. However, overall, females used slightly fewer taboo words than males while the older females tended to use the milder forms of Taboo English.
- In general, there is also little difference in the strength of taboo words employed by each gender. The difference lies in the use of specific words such as ‘fuck’, ‘cunt’ and ‘mother-fucker’. These words were used more frequently by males than females.
- The findings indicate that age, rather than gender has a greater influence of the speakers use of taboo language. The younger male and female ESOL teachers used Taboo English more frequently than their older counterparts.

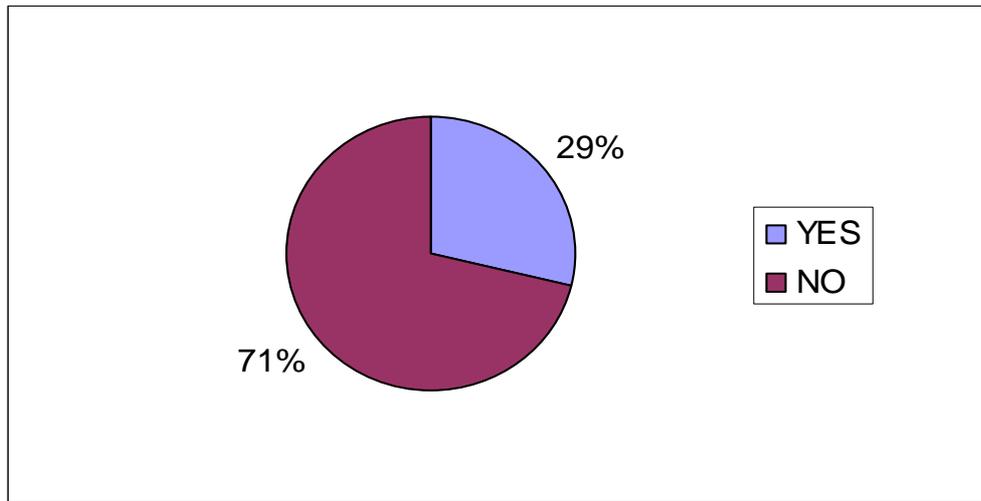
**CHAPTER FIVE**  
**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS**  
**TEACHING ABOUT TABOO ENGLISH IN THE SECOND LANGUAGE**  
**CLASSROOM**

**5.1 CHAPTER OVERVIEW**

Chapter 5 reports on teachers' attitudes towards teaching about Taboo English and illustrates the importance of addressing this language in the L2 classroom. It is important to point out that little appears to have been published on Taboo English and its teaching implications for ESOL students learning everyday conversational English. Furthermore, studies investigating teacher reaction to the teaching of Taboo English have proved to be even scarcer. Therefore, the findings of the current study that are presented in this section of the Results and Discussion chapter are seldom compared to the findings of past research due to the limited number of studies I have been able to find investigating teacher reaction to the teaching of Taboo English.

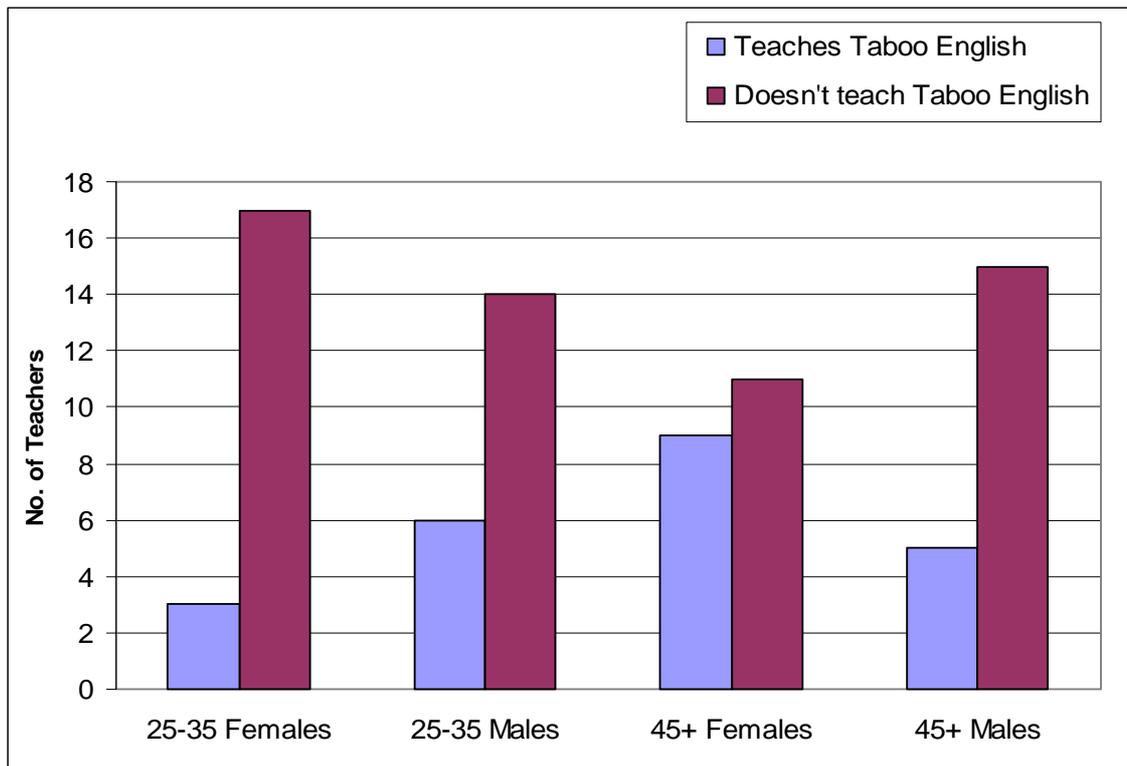
**5.2 THE NUMBER OF TEACHERS WHO TEACH ABOUT TABOO ENGLISH IN THE SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM**

The research surveyed teachers' attitudes towards teaching about taboo words to adult ESOL learners of conversational English. Teachers were simply asked to tick either 'yes' or 'no' to indicate if they taught about Taboo English in the second language classroom. Teachers were also encouraged to make subjective comments about their choice of answers. These findings are presented in Figure 15.



**Figure 15. The Percentage Of ESOL Teachers Who Teach About Taboo English In The L2 Classroom**

Despite acknowledging that taboo words are frequently heard in society today, an overwhelming majority of participants (71%) or 57 out of the 80 teachers reported that they did not teach about Taboo English in the L2 classroom. However, the remaining 29% or 23 out of 80 participants reported addressing this controversial aspect of language. The demographic patterns are presented in Figure 16.



**Figure 16. The Number Of ESOL Teachers Who Teach About Taboo English In The L2 Classroom By Gender**

The first clear conclusion from this data is that, in general, teachers did not teach about taboo words in the L2 classroom. Gender did not prove to be an important variable as a very similar number of males (29 out of 40) and females (28 out of 40) displayed little enthusiasm for teaching about taboo words. Age, however, proved to be a more important factor. Overall, the older teachers taught about taboo language more frequently than their younger counterparts. In fact, 14 out of 40 of the older teachers taught about Taboo English. In comparison, only 9 out of 40 of the younger teachers reported that they addressed this taboo language.

A number of interesting demographic variables emerged. Further analysis of the data revealed that, on the whole, the 45+ females had the most positive attitude towards teaching about taboo words. However, it is necessary to point out that these 45+ females displayed a clear divide in attitudes with (45%) reporting they taught about taboo words while the remaining 55% showed no enthusiasm for addressing this aspect of language. However, the finding that these older females reported the most enthusiasm for addressing Taboo English is perhaps not as surprising as expected especially when one

revisits patterns established earlier in the current study (See Section 4.2). This earlier data showed that these older females demonstrated a relatively liberal attitude towards the offensiveness of words in society. Furthermore, this demographic group also reported a high frequency of taboo use earlier in the current study (See Sections 4.4-4.5).

It is interesting that the younger teachers generally demonstrated greater reluctance to address taboo words than their older counterparts, given that earlier findings found that, overall, the younger teachers employed taboo words more frequently than their older counterparts in everyday conversation (See Sections 4.4-4.6.2). It also became evident that the younger females, closely followed by the older males, showed the least enthusiasm for teaching about taboo words. In fact, 17 out of the 20 younger females (85%) and 15 out of the 20 older males (75%) reported that they did not address taboo English in the L2 classroom. Again this finding is perhaps not that unexpected, given that these two demographic groups demonstrated the highest levels of unacceptability towards taboo words commonly heard in society (See Section 4.2). The younger males showed slightly more enthusiasm for teaching about Taboo English than the 25+ females and 45+ males. However, the fact that 70% or 14 out of 20 younger males displayed a negative attitude towards taboo words in the L2 classroom is surprising considering that this demographic group consistently employed taboo words the most frequently in everyday conversation (See Sections 4.4-4.6.2).

An analysis of the qualitative data revealed that those teachers who supported teaching about Taboo English were in agreement that this aspect of the English language could not be completely ignored due to its prevalence in society today:

*“It’s a reality of day-to-day life in New Zealand and many other English-speaking countries. It cannot be completely ignored.”*

In addition, these teachers also consistently mentioned the importance of teaching about the appropriacy and inappropriacy of taboo words in order to prevent intercultural miscommunication:

*“I believe it is part of my role as an ESOL teacher to teach all facets of the English language in order to prevent embarrassing situations for ESOL learners who may be unaware of the inappropriateness of certain words.”*

*“I teach it because I think it's important for second language students to be very familiar with when it's okay and when it's not okay to use swearing and profanity.”*

However, this view was not shared by the majority of teachers who displayed more negative attitudes. Several teachers were particularly adamant that Taboo English was simply not worthy of teaching time and should be completely excluded from the L2 classroom:

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

However, others were more neutral in their comments and a number of common reasons for not teaching about Taboo English emerged. Firstly, several teachers explained that the academic nature of their courses did not allow any scope for addressing taboo words. Other teachers reported that they had never incorporated Taboo English into his lessons as the idea of “Taboo English” lessons had never been considered:

*“I have never given this any great thought before. On reflection, I think that it's important to teach about taboo words to build on the knowledge and awareness that students pick up from the life outside the classroom.”*

It also became evident that teachers who seldom used taboo language themselves felt inhibited using Taboo English in the classroom stressing that they would find it particularly difficult to talk about the literal meanings of taboo words:

*“I would feel very uncomfortable since I rarely use bad language myself. I believe students would find it a joke.”*

*“I would feel uncomfortable, especially teaching the literal meanings of several words.”*

However, one reason in particular was consistently cited for not addressing taboo words. Teachers were in wide agreement that the direct instruction of Taboo English was unnecessary as L2 learners would acquire this language naturally. The following comments succinctly illustrate this attitude:

*“It’s a natural part of modern English, and students are exposed to it just as much as native speakers. Most English speakers know what those words mean. Why should my students be any different?”*

*“Learners will adopt them into the language the way children do - we won’t and don’t teach children these words. - why language learners?!!”*

*“Students, like children, will pick up street/gutter language without formal instruction.”*

While L2 learners will inevitably come into contact with Taboo English in the ‘real’ world, I do not believe however, that these non-native speakers will acquire taboo language simply by ‘osmosis’. Moreover, nor do I believe that the L2 student will learn this language from peers or family given that these second language learners do not usually have family and peer support who have a sophisticated knowledge of taboo words (Claire 2000).

I argue that teachers need to be more concerned about their students’ knowledge of and potential use of taboo language. Discussions of taboo language could be of relevance in the class as these L2 learners may also be the targets of derogatory remarks based on race, creed and culture. Therefore, it is important for teachers to address Taboo English to allow students to defend themselves when such language is being used around them or directed at them. This is echoed by Fraser (1981: 440-441) who emphasises that it is not the role of teachers to “develop effective English insulters” but suggests a knowledge of frequent terms and techniques of insulting in English empowers the ESOL student to recognise when they are “being insulted, of avoiding being an

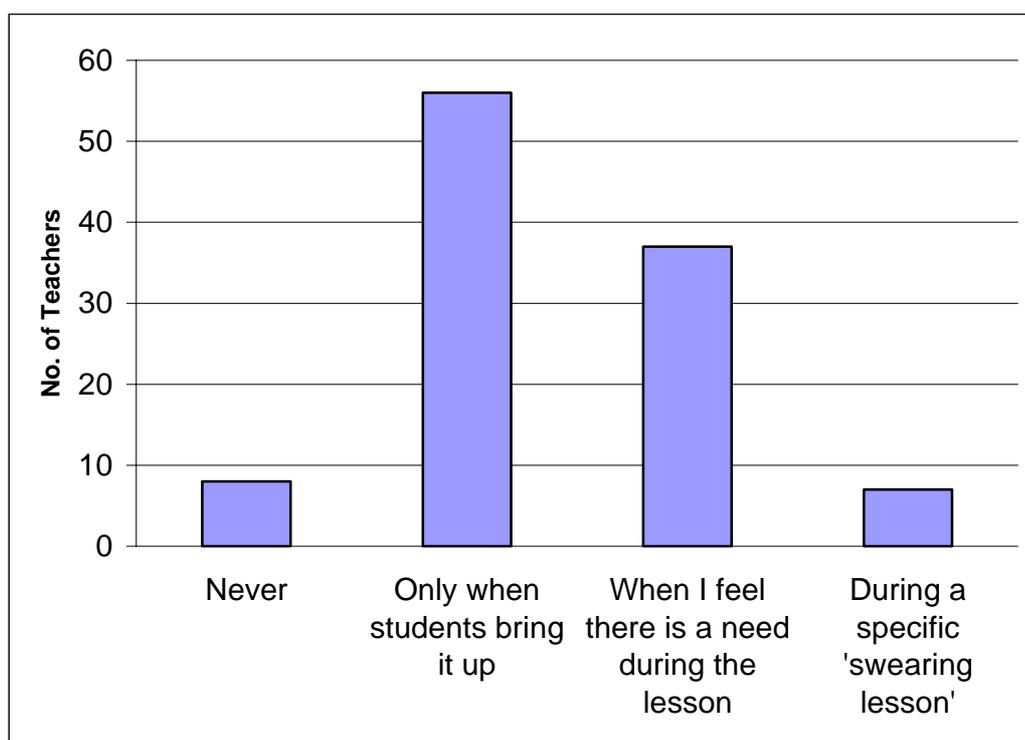
ineffective insulter, or even worse, being an inadvertent one.” Furthermore, learners need to know that taboo words have degrees of offensiveness, depending on how they are used. It can be difficult for a L2 learner to gauge the strength of taboo words. For example saying, “Oh Fuck!” as an expression of frustration is perhaps not as offensive as using the phrase “You stupid fucking bastard!” as a serious insult.

It is important to point out that teachers who stated that they did not teach about taboo words in the L2 classroom, also responded to the other questions in Part D of the questionnaire about teaching about taboo words. The results often appear to be contradictory. For example, while the vast majority reported that they did not teach about taboo words in the L2 classroom, many teachers reported that that were prepared to answer any queries about Taboo English when specifically asked by learners during a lesson as discussed in the following section. The following section also illustrates that the fear of offending learners emerges as one of the key reasons why many of the ESOL teachers were reluctant to address this ‘bad’ or ‘unacceptable’ language in the L2 classroom.

### **5.3 WHEN ESOL TEACHERS ADDRESS TABOO ENGLISH IN THE SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM**

The research also aimed to investigate when teachers address Taboo English in the L2 classroom. Teachers were asked to indicate if and when they taught about Taboo English by selecting one or more of the following four options. It is important to point out that teachers could select more than one option and teachers who ticked the box for ‘only when the students bring up the words’ frequently ticked ‘when I feel there is a need’. Participants were also encouraged to make subjective comments about their choice of answers. The findings are summarised in Figure 17.

- a) never
- b) only when students bring up the words
- c) when I feel there is a need during the lesson
- d) during a specific ‘swearing lesson’.



**Figure 17. When ESOL Teachers Teach About Taboo English in the L2 Classroom**

The first clear conclusion is that the vast majority of teachers (70%) reported most commonly addressing taboo words incidentally. In other words, the ESOL teachers reported that they were prepared to answer any queries about Taboo English when specifically asked by learners during a lesson. A further consideration of Figure 17 also indicates that just under half (46%) of those surveyed also reported teaching about taboo words when they felt it was necessary. In this instance, teachers frequently cited situations where they felt it was necessary to explain the appropriacy of a taboo word during a lesson which had occurred in a movie or in a written piece of text for example.

In addition, the figure also shows that almost an equal number of participants held polarised views about teaching Taboo English. Ten percent of those surveyed stated that they never taught their L2 learners about taboo words. Those teachers who never teach about Taboo English represented each demographic group. Conversely, 9% reported having specific 'swearing lessons'. Table 7 details when each demographic group addressed this language in the L2 classroom and revealed that age and gender influenced when teachers chose to teach about Taboo English to a slight degree.

**Table 7. When ESOL Teachers Teach About Taboo English In The Second Language Classroom**

	<b>Never</b>	<b>Only when students bring up the words</b>	<b>When I feel there is a need during the lesson</b>	<b>During a specific ‘swearing lesson’.</b>
<b>25-35 Females</b>	3	17	10	1
<b>25-35 Males</b>	1	12	9	2
<b>45+ Females</b>	1	12	12	3
<b>45+ Males</b>	3	15	6	1
<b>All Participants</b>	8	56	37	7

With regard to demographic variables, the following patterns emerged. Overall, the older females showed slightly more enthusiasm for teaching about taboo language in the second language classroom than the other demographic groups. Conversely, their older male counterparts, closely followed by the 25-35 females, displayed the least enthusiasm for addressing this aspect of language. On the whole, responses indicated that there was little enthusiasm for teaching about taboo words in any systematic manner. However, this is not to say that Taboo English is being ignored by all teachers as 9% of the participants reported that they addressed taboo words during specific ‘swearing lessons’. These teachers who had specific swearing lessons shared the opinion that learners needed a knowledge of taboo words to enable them to communicate in a society where speakers use them as a matter of course in daily conversation:

*“We are supposed to be equipping them with tools to get by in everyday English. If they hear these words outside of class and to incorporate them into the speech without knowing the proper uses, function, meaning or severity, they could get into trouble.”*

While 70% of the teachers held the view that they would respond to a query about Taboo English if directly asked by a learner during a lesson, comments revealed that teachers were not overly enthusiastic about teaching about this feature of language.

*“Only if it comes up. Not as a deliberate strategy but if it inevitably comes up, it is dealt with then.”*

*“On occasion when students ask for the meaning of swear words they have been exposed to, I'd answer their questions. It's not usually part of the curriculum, although if I am asked I explain the uses of it.”*

*“Unless it comes up. I wouldn't introduce it but I'd run with it if it seemed appropriate.”*

In addition, it became evident that in general, these teachers were often only prepared to spend a 'minimal amount of time' teaching this aspect of language. This in turn implies that while teachers were willing to scratch the surface when directly asked by a student, they were not prepared to go to great lengths to provide comprehensive explanations about the taboo word brought up during a lesson. This assumption is further supported by the following comments:

*“If it comes up, I will briefly cover why it isn't appropriate, but might say when it is.”*

*“I'll briefly explain the usage of whatever swear words students come to ask about and I'd also let them know that it is regarded as undesirable language. I can't understand why it is such an issue. People in New Zealand are using profanities to replace proper English to such an extent that they no longer recognise "English". They are forgetting what good English should sound like!”*

*“It doesn't interest me. If they expressed interest, I'd respond. I won't explain how strong/how rude the word was and where to use/not to use.”*

Furthermore, it also became apparent that a number of the 37 teachers who reported teaching about taboo words when 'they felt there was a need' did not go to any great

lengths either to explain terms that appeared in movies, newspapers or magazines used during classroom activities.

*“I rarely teach about swear words because students can understand insults and only look silly trying to swear for real. If they occur on a video, a brief explanation will do.”*

*“I won't allow a lot of time on it but I will teach students about them at times of relevance such as when they occur in a video we are watching in class.”*

It also became evident that another key reason for not addressing taboo words was the ESOL teachers' attitudes that learners would feel 'uncomfortable' about being taught taboo language. Many of these teachers were clearly concerned about offending learners if they conducted lessons that focussed on 'rude' and 'bad' language, as illustrated by the following comments:

*“Students might be offended (especially those from conservative backgrounds). I'm thinking of more mature/religious students, particularly Asian students. They may find it very offensive if the teacher models, and therefore condones on some level, profanities.”*

*“These things come naturally. You could offend some students by teaching it is a lesson.”*

*“Because of a fear of students taking offence, it's not something I like to introduce. I might ask "what's another, more informal way to say this?" leaving it open for students to include profanity in their suggested answers but I generally will never model any swear words for my students.”*

*“Should students ask the meaning and/or appropriateness of a particular word or phrase I would explain it and gauge the level of interest from the rest of the class. I believe the teacher shouldn't "force the issue" and allow the students to raise the subject.”*

These results have shown that many teachers do not address Taboo English for fear of offending learners. An interesting question therefore is: 'Do learners actually find Taboo English lessons offensive and ultimately see little value in learning this aspect of language? A study conducted by Crooks (1998) in Australia provides counter evidence. This study, investigating the perception upper-intermediate learners had towards Taboo English classes, revealed that the majority of learners indicated strong support and enthusiasm for the sessions on Taboo English. Crooks (1998) reported that the learners considered the language and knowledge contained in the Taboo English sessions to be valuable and interesting and endorsed the material used to teach taboo language. These lessons were based on materials from 'Dangerous English!' (Claire, 1990) and 'Bleep!' (Burke, 1993) - two texts specialising in teaching about Taboo English for L2 learners. Moreover, students were of the opinion that a knowledge of Taboo English contributed to their understanding of the culture and English language. Crooks's study (1998) supports the argument that L2 learners see Taboo English classes as valuable for both their acquisition of English and their ability to comprehend and take part in everyday conversation with native speakers. While the results of Crooks's study (1998) does provide some evidence that L2 learners also consider Taboo English a vital feature worthy of classroom time. However, further research is required in this area of Taboo English and second language acquisition in order to support this claim.

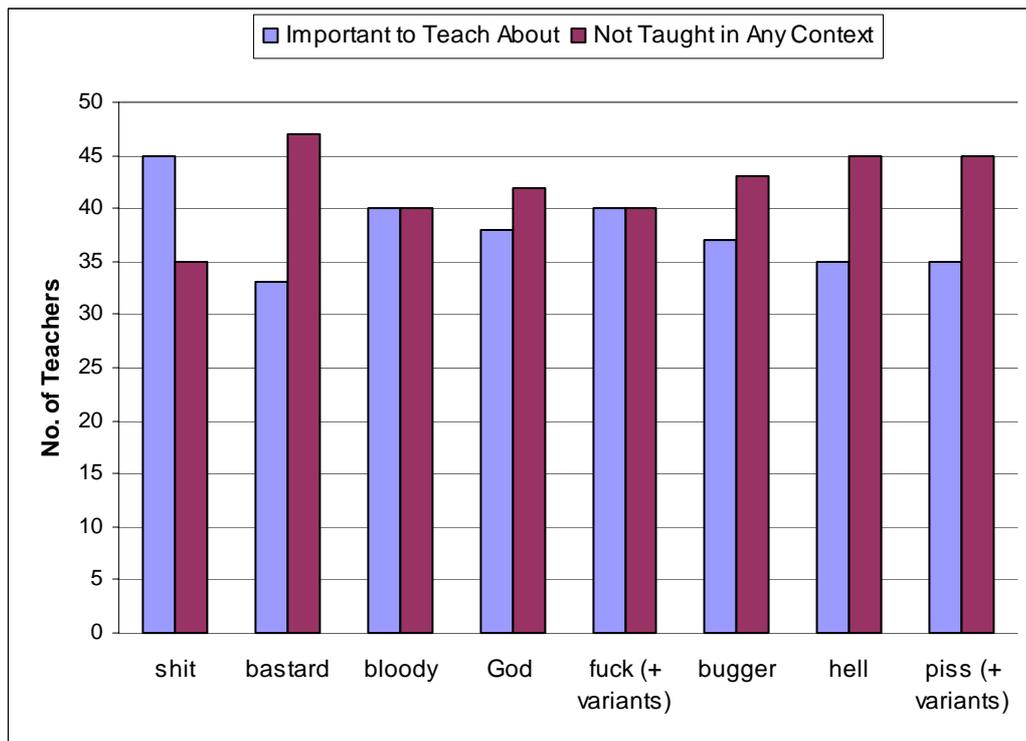
By definition, many taboo words are offensive and it could be argued that teachers may be doing more potential harm than good by not addressing these lexemes of the linguistic underworld. This is reiterated by Register (1996: 44-45) who states that by not addressing taboo words, teachers "may do learners more communicative harm than good, as it puts them (learners) at a disadvantage when dealing with native speakers who use them (taboo words) as a matter of course. Furthermore, Mercury (1995: 31) states that it is likely that second language learners "often misunderstand and misuse obscene language simply because they are left on their own to learn about its use." Learners need to be given the option of whether or not to attend Taboo English classes. In addition to being optional, I would also suggest that Taboo English lessons are taught in single gender classes.

The following section reveals ESOL teachers' attitudes towards teaching about 8 taboo words commonly employed by speakers in society today.

## **5.4 TABOO WORDS CONSIDERED IMPORTANT TO TEACH AND WORDS NOT TAUGHT IN ANY CONTEXT**

The ESOL teachers were asked to evaluate the importance of teaching eight taboo words frequently heard in society today. They were asked to tick either 'important to teach' or 'do not teach in any context' to indicate whether they considered any of the following eight words worthy of teaching time in the L2 classroom. Participants were also encouraged to make subjective comments about their choice of answers. The findings are summarised in Figure 18.

- 1) shit
- 2) bastard
- 3) bloody
- 4) God
- 5) fuck (+ variants)
- 6) bugger
- 7) hell
- 8) piss (+ variants)



**Figure 18. Taboo Words Considered Important To Teach And Taboo Words Not Taught In Any Context**

Overall, more than 50% of the ESOL teachers in the current study did not consider any of the 8 words worthy of teaching time in spite of the fact that there was wide agreement that these words were commonly heard in the public domain:

*“I only teach about these words if asked, as these are probably the most common words heard in Kiwi English.”*

*“I teach all of them, as they are commonly used in some parts of society and in the media.”*

*“I think all these words are important to teach in a New Zealand classroom as they seem to be part of New Zealand language.”*

However, despite acknowledging that these words are frequently heard in society today, Figure 18 shows that more than half of the ESOL teachers surveyed reported that they did not address 7 out of these 8 words in any context. Participants were least willing to

teach about ‘bastard’ (59%) while an equal number were not prepared to address ‘hell’ and ‘piss’ (56%), closely followed by ‘bugger’ (54%) and ‘God’ at 52%. Exactly half of the ESOL teachers did not teach about the taboo words ‘fuck’ and ‘bloody’ (50%), while 44% reported that they did not teach about ‘shit’ in any context. It is worth pointing out that several teachers commented on how the terms ‘hell’, ‘piss’, ‘bugger’ and ‘bloody’ are rapidly losing currency as taboo words and, therefore, unnecessary to address in the L2 classroom:

*“I don’t think there is any need to teach about hell, bugger and bloody because they are not offensive so learners won’t get into trouble using them.”*

While the ESOL teachers considered ‘shit’ and ‘fuck’ to have the greatest pedagogic importance in the L2 classroom, a large majority reported that they did not address these words in any context. This is of concern as these two Taboo English words have become increasingly common in spoken English today. This argument is supported by earlier results of the current study (See Section 4.2) which found that ESOL teachers perceived ‘fuck’ to be the third most offensive word in the English language. In addition, results (See Section 4.3) also showed that ESOL teachers shared the widely held view that ‘shit’ and ‘fuck’ were the two most frequently heard words in the public arena. Moreover, many teachers reported using these words with some degree of regularity in everyday speech. In fact, the participants reported commonly employing ‘fuck’ to express feelings in situations ranging from expressing anger to expressing a jocular insult, while the vast majority (79%) also reported that they most commonly employed ‘shit’ to vent anger or surprise. It is also perhaps not surprising that teachers also expressed concern about L2 learners being confused about the offensiveness of ‘fuck’ and ‘shit’ due to their prevalence in everyday conversation:

*“People use these words so frequently, that learners might not actually realise that they are swear words, and are used when you are with friends and not with your boss.”*

*“I think because ‘shit’ and ‘fuck’ are often used in American films, students may assume they aren’t swear words but colloquialisms.”*

A further consideration of Figure 18 shows that 'God' was considered to be the third most important word to teach about on the list of 8 words. This is an interesting finding as, generally, participants considered the religious term, 'Jesus Christ', to be slightly offensive (Grade 2) when heard in everyday conversation (See Section 4.2). However, as more than 50% of those surveyed reported personally refraining from using 'Jesus Christ' in any situation (See Section 4.6), it is perhaps not overly surprising that 'God' is perceived to be an important word to address in the L2 classroom. The following comments are typical of many of the teachers' attitudes towards teaching about these two religious words to L2 students:

*"I also 'point out' that to a committed Christian or religious person the word 'God', 'Jesus Christ' or 'hell' may be very inappropriate and doesn't show respect for someone else's beliefs."*

*"I always make my students aware of religious/blasphemy situations however. For example, when teaching expressions of surprise (Oh my God!) I think it's important for them to know that some folks will frown on what others consider a totally innocuous exclamation."*

*"I would never teach a specific swearing lesson! As a Christian, however, I make it clear to students that using 'God' is an offence to both me personally and to God Himself. If they use blasphemy I explain why it's offensive and ask them not to use such language in my classroom."*

It can also be seen from Figure 18 that 'bastard' was considered to be the least important word to teach about on the list. In addition, 'bloody' and 'fuck' were considered to be equally important to teach, while 'bugger' was considered to be slightly more important to teach about than 'piss' (+ variants). It is important to emphasise that earlier results (See Section 4.2) found that more than 75% of those surveyed were generally not offended by the terms 'bugger' and 'bloody' while 'bastard' was considered to be the eighth most offensive word on the list. On the basis of these findings, it could be argued that ESOL teachers were prepared to teach about the more mild forms of taboo language such as 'bloody' and 'bugger' because these two words are perceived to be relatively innocuous and becoming more permissible by society. Hence, this could suggest that have ESOL teachers have less antipathy to

teaching the sociolinguistic meaning of the rather innocuous terms ‘bugger’ and ‘bloody’.

With regard to the demographic variables, it became clear that on the whole, the older teachers had a more positive attitude towards teaching about Taboo English than their younger counterparts. Closer analysis of the data further showed that the 25-35 females generally demonstrated the least enthusiasm for addressing taboo language. This negative perception held by the younger females towards the direct instruction of Taboo English in the L2 classroom is clearly illustrated by comparing the attitudes of participants from each demographic group towards the importance of teaching the taboo word ‘hell’. While 75% of the younger females reported that they would not teach these words in any context, around 50% of teachers from the other demographic groups reported they would teach this word if specifically asked by a learner.

Analysis of the qualitative data revealed several emergent themes which generally confirm patterns established earlier in the current study. Clearly there were three main perspectives regarding the importance of teaching these eight taboo words in the L2 classroom. Teachers who displayed positive, negative and neutral attitudes. Firstly, those teachers who were positive about teaching the eight words on the list referred to the importance of teaching about these words as they are commonly heard in spoken English today:

*“Like or it or not, they are a part of everyday vocab heard by students and they need to know what is generally acceptable and when not to use them.”*

Conversely, a large majority considered the classroom to be an inappropriate place to learn these eight taboo words. Teachers saw “little point” addressing these words and concluded that learners should ‘self study’ taboo words using specialist texts. However, overall, while the vast majority of teachers held the view that they would not initiate ‘swearing lessons’ to address these 8 words, the ESOL teachers were in wide agreement that it was important to address these words if specifically asked by learners. The following excerpts sum up the typical attitude of many of the participants:

*“On a day to day basis I wouldn’t choose to teach any of these words unless asked.”*

*“None of these words are important enough in their own right to actually spend time teaching. I won't deliberately not teach any of these words but if they "come up" in the lesson, then that's a different matter.”*

*“I would only "teach" them in so far as students wanted to learn about them. If they have heard one of these words and need clarification as to the connotations and use I am happy to provide this but I can't see myself instigating any discussion about these words. "Teaching" would not involve much clarification of written/spoken form (unless specifically requested) i.e. I would not write most of them on the board (except bloody, hell, piss) and I probably wouldn't model most of the them (especially "shit", "fuck" etc) and I would probably deal with this after class.”*

A recurring theme was the teachers' attitudes that learners would acquire this language incidentally as well as the perception that learners would find lessons on taboo words 'embarrassing' and 'offensive':

*“I seriously doubt that many of these students swear in their first language. I'm sure the majority would be uncomfortable being exposed to taboo words.”*

A further emerging concept is the number of teachers who had simply never considered the idea of teaching about taboo words but were keen to do so.

*“I have never taught a specific swearing lesson but would love the opportunity to discuss these words in class.”*

*“I haven't taught about any of these words and probably wouldn't know where to start if I did want to teach about them!”*

Moreover, responses also suggested that a lack of materials available to address Taboo English could hinder the formal instruction of this aspect of language:

*“There doesn't seem to be any room for the classic approaches to language teaching in regard to Taboo English. Gap fills? Drilling? I think not.”*

*It's extremely difficult to teach about taboo words. The appropriate and inappropriate and different contexts of use for swear words are difficult to define. For this reason, I don't teach them in a classroom situation."*

In light of this information, I propose that it is possible that ESOL teachers are left out on a 'pedagogical limb' when it comes to teaching about Taboo English. In other words, the uncertainty about the best approach towards teaching about taboo words may result in some teachers simply refraining from addressing this controversial issue in the L2 classroom. However, future research is required in order to prove or disprove this theory.

With regard to the L2 classroom, it is important that learners studying and living in an English-speaking environment need to know the difference between 'slang' and Taboo English. Learners need to understand that despite their frequent use in conversational English, taboo words such as 'fuck' and 'shit' are considered to be offensive by some sectors of society. However, it could be a perplexing problem for L2 learners who may not be aware of this difference and who may place them into one big off-limits category. Register (1996) is one of the few researchers who has not overlooked the need to investigate L2 learners' recognition, understanding, and use of Taboo English and slang words. She conducted an interesting research project at an American university in which 68 male and 88 female L2 learners completed a questionnaire while listening to a short audiotape including 14 taboo words such as 'shit', 'son of a bitch', 'hell', 'bastard' and 'asshole' as well as 6 informal non-offensive words heard in everyday speech such as 'crap', 'whore' and 'fart'. Subsequently, the same data was gathered from 86 undergraduate native English speakers. Of the native speaker participants, 27 were male and 59 were female.

One of Register's (1996) most salient findings found that L2 speakers struggled to discriminate between taboo words, slang and harmless idioms. Register drew the conclusion that L2 learners rejected the use of non-offensive words as they feared they might be taboo, while others reported that they try to avoid 'slang' which they considered to be 'not good English'. Therefore, teachers need to point out the difference between Taboo English and slang. Learners could be informed that generally, slang is creative and ever changing colloquial language that is short lived, group related and below the level of stylistically neutral language (Stenstrom, Anderson, & Hasund,

2002). Taboo English differs from slang in the respect that this language is always associated with some kind of taboo. Moreover, taboo words are often used to vent strong emotions and attitudes and should not always be interpreted literally (Andersson and Trudgill, 1990). This knowledge will help assist learners recognise taboo expressions, including discriminatory language and provides further insight into the complicated aspects surrounding the use of Taboo English.

The following section discusses strategies employed by teachers to address Taboo English in the L2 classroom.

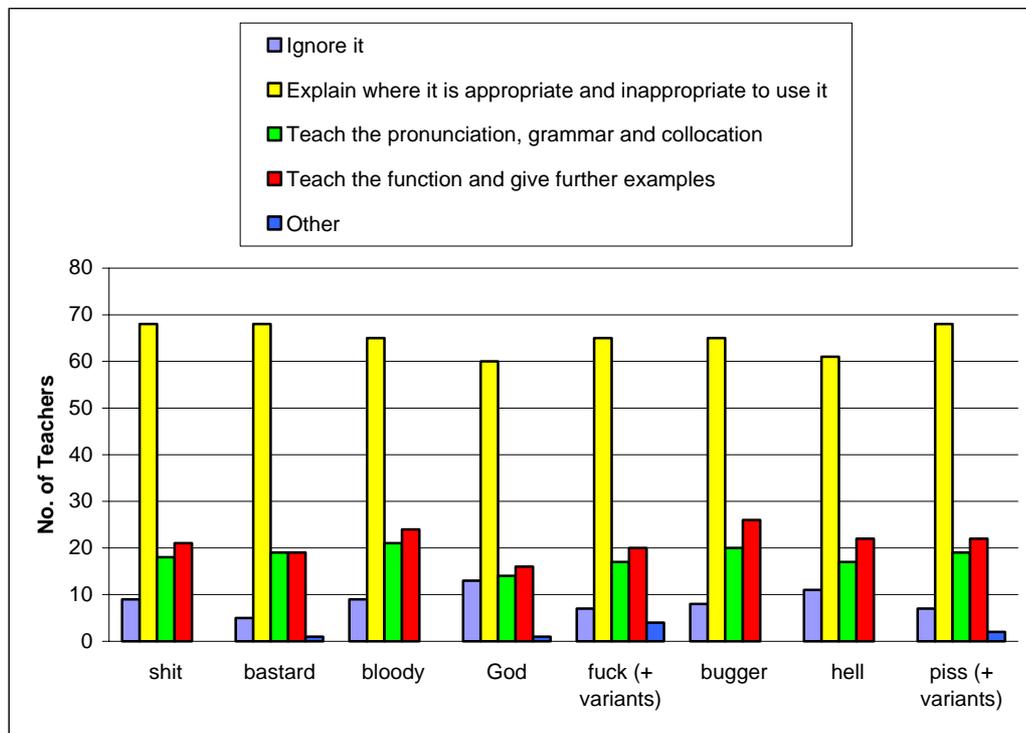
## **5.5 STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY ESOL TEACHERS TO TEACH ABOUT TABOO ENGLISH**

The research also aimed to investigate the strategies employed by teachers to teach about Taboo English. Teachers were asked to indicate how they addressed the following eight and other taboo words, if they either overheard a student using taboo language in the classroom, a student specifically enquired about a word or if a taboo word arose incidentally during a lesson.

- 1) shit
- 2) bastard
- 3) bloody
- 4) God
- 5) fuck (+ variants)
- 6) bugger
- 7) hell
- 8) piss (+ variants)

Teachers were asked to indicate how they addressed these words by selecting one or more of the following five choices. As this question was primarily designed to explore techniques teachers used to address taboo language in the L2 classroom, participants were asked to give examples of how they taught about taboo words. Teachers were also encouraged to make subjective comments about their choice of answers. However, this question yielded disappointing results primarily due to the minimal and at times rather pedagogically unsound techniques and examples listed by the ESOL teachers. Figure 19 presents the results of my analysis.

- 1) Ignore it.
- 2) Explain where it is appropriate and inappropriate to use.
- 3) Teach the pronunciation, grammar and collocation.
- 4) Teach the function and give further examples.
- 5) Other.



**Figure 19. Strategies Employed By ESOL Teachers To Teach About Taboo English**

It becomes immediately apparent that the vast majority of teachers reported most commonly explaining the appropriacy or inappropriacy of a word when they overheard a student using Taboo English in the classroom or if a student specifically brought up the word during a lesson. In fact, for each of the 8 words around 80% of those surveyed reported employing this strategy. A further glance at the graph shows that far fewer teachers (just under 30%) reported teaching the functions and giving further examples of taboo words. Even fewer of those surveyed (around 25%) were prepared to teach about the pronunciation, grammar and collocation of these taboo words in the L2 classroom. Analysis also revealed that ignoring the word was the least common strategy employed by around 10% of the ESOL teachers.

### 5.5.1 Teaching The Appropriate And Inappropriate Use Of Taboo English

A closer look at the data reveals that 85% percent of those surveyed reported teaching the appropriate and inappropriate uses of ‘shit’, ‘bastard’ and ‘piss’ (+variants). Eighty one percent explained the appropriacy and inappropriacy of the words ‘bloody’, ‘fuck’ (+variants) and ‘bugger’ followed by ‘hell’ (76%) and ‘God’ at 75%. It is interesting that while earlier results (See Section 5.4) found ‘God’ to be the third most important word on the list of eight words to teach about, not all participants considered it necessary to explain that the inappropriate use of ‘God’ in a blasphemous manner could offend some sectors of society.

Similarly, it is interesting that 85% of participants considered it important to teach about ‘bastard’. This finding appears to contradict earlier results (See Section 5.4) which found that ‘bastard’ was considered to be the least important word on the list to address in the L2 classroom. However, as earlier results (See Section 4.6.) found that ‘bastard’ was commonly employed by speakers in the current study to express a serious insult, it is evident that teachers saw the importance of teaching the appropriate and inappropriate use of the more offensive words. It is also important to point out the graph does not convey the typical attitudes of many of the teachers who stated that they would only explain the appropriate use of these words if specifically asked by a learner:

*“I would only explain if a word was appropriate or inappropriate to use if requested by a genuinely concerned student.”*

*“If I overheard a student using the word in the classroom I would ignore it but if a student specifically brought up a word during a lesson, I would teach the inappropriate use of the word.”*

Teachers also listed a variety of strategies to teach about the appropriate and inappropriate use of Taboo English. A number of teachers provided detailed explanations about the appropriate uses of Taboo English such as:

*“I would indicate settings where others use them and where/when they should be avoided and politer expressions used. E.g. talking to a group of policemen or talking to your employer/ wife/ children/ grandmother.”*

The 25-35 females and 45+ males reported teaching the appropriate and inappropriate use of taboo words more frequently than the other demographic groups. However, these teachers shared the opinion that detailed explanations were unnecessary and, therefore, simply informed learners that the words were unsuitable for classroom discussion. This attitude is illustrated by the following comments:

*“I would tell the student this word is not to be used in the classroom because it is very offensive to most people.”*

*“In regard to bastard, god, fuck and piss, I would warn students about the potentially offensive nature and point out that the class is not a place to use it.”*

*“If I explained that swear words are inappropriate in the classroom and discuss where those words may be appropriate. If after understanding this, a student intentionally swore in class I'd asked them to leave the room for a set time to reinforce it's inappropriate in the class.”*

It would appear that these teachers perceive themselves to be ‘linguistic gate-keepers’ who consider the ESOL classroom to be a swear-word-free zone. I argue that these practitioners need to reassess their attitudes towards teaching about Taboo English. The ESOL classroom should not be viewed as swear-word-free zone. Instead, it should be viewed as a safe place where L2 learners can rehearse Taboo English and make mistakes without serious implications, a rehearsal for the real-world.

### **5.5.2 Teaching the functions and giving further examples of Taboo English**

Far fewer teachers reported teaching the functions and giving further examples of the eight words on the list. Each demographic group reported that they were most willing to teach about either ‘bugger’ (33%) or ‘bloody’ (30%), ‘hell’ and ‘piss’ (28%). Twenty six percent of those surveyed reported that they were prepared to teach the function of ‘shit’ (26%), ‘fuck’ (25%), ‘bastard’ (24%) followed by ‘God’ (20%). It can be observed that the ESOL teachers were more prepared to teach the functions of the rather

innocuous words 'bugger' and 'bloody' followed by 'hell'. Responses showed that participants were less willing to address the more offensive words 'fuck' and 'bastard'. Teachers reported explaining the function of 'God' the least frequently. It became apparent that teachers who taught the functions and gave examples of taboo language had the most positive attitudes towards the direct instruction of Taboo English in the L2 classroom:

*"Swear words are used outside of the sterile environment of the classroom. I try to address swear words as often as I can. I just want learners to that there are negative words out there that are used to describe Chinese students and Chinese drivers. I want to provide them with enough knowledge to know not to smile and wave to someone when they are being called a bad name."*

*"Students must understand what they hear. They don't have to produce it. It can be very embarrassing to be in a situation where a native speaker is using swear words to insult a foreign language learner, who has no idea of what's happening."*

*"I consider that students learning a second language should be aware of all aspects of that language or culture including swearing and profanity. It is a false attitude to "fence off" a part of that language."*

In addition, it is important to point out that those teachers who actually taught about the functions of taboo words emphasised that learners appreciated learning this language.

*"I generally teach the pronunciation and grammar of a few words a week and I have found that learners actually appreciate being taught these words."*

*"I am not afraid to deal with "taboo" subjects e.g. language if our students want answers. Furthermore, students generally are keen to learn this important aspect of language!"*

*"We had a lot of laughs learning about taboo words and I think the students appreciated the fact that I didn't treat them like babies. Sometimes students have*

*heard something which they don't understand so I will explain it to them. They are adults and should be treated as such."*

These comments support the findings of Crooks's Australian study (1998) which concluded that L2 learners found Taboo English lessons beneficial. It would be of value to conduct a study investigating L2 learners attitudes towards learning about Taboo English in the future.

### **5.5.3 Teaching the pronunciation, grammar and collocation of Taboo English**

A further glance at Figure 19 shows that the majority of teachers were most reluctant to teach about the pronunciation, grammar and collocation of taboo words. However, around a quarter of those surveyed were prepared to address the pronunciation, grammar and collocation of the relatively innocuous word 'bloody' (26%) and 'bugger' (25%) closely followed by 'bastard' and 'piss' (24%) and 'shit' (23%). Twenty one percent stated that they would teach the pronunciation, grammar and collocation of 'fuck' and 'hell' followed by 'God' at 18%.

There are several points worthy of discussion here. Firstly, it is again evident that the ESOL teachers in the current study were willing to teach the pronunciation, grammar and collocation of the relatively innocuous words 'bloody' followed by 'bugger'. However, results showed that these teachers were slightly more hesitant to teach about 'fuck'. These findings reinforce my earlier argument that overall, the ESOL teachers are more prepared to teach about the more mild forms of Taboo English words such as 'bloody' and 'bugger' which are generally perceived to be relatively innocuous and becoming more permissible by society (See Section 4.2).

There is one notable feature in regard to demographic patterns which, at first glance, seems to contradict past trends evident in the current study. The younger females and older male ESOL teachers reported teaching the pronunciation, grammar and collocation of these words slightly more frequently than the 45+ females, while the 25-35 males reported teaching the pronunciation, grammar and collocation of the 8 words the most often. However, closer analysis reveals that the 25-35 females and 45+ males

were more willing to teach the more mild forms of taboo language while the 25-35 males and older females consistently reported teaching about each of the 8 words on the list.

Analysis of the qualitative data suggested that teachers were reluctant to address taboo words for fear of being reproached by colleagues and management. This perception is clearly reflected by the following comments:

*“I wouldn’t do the pronunciation because I feel nervous about my seniors and colleagues disapproving, if they heard drilling etc. coming from my classroom! I feel then my teaching probably wouldn’t be effective and comprehensive.”*

*“I would probably teach swearing more if my school had clear guidelines or policy on it and my DOS, and supported us. I’d heard of too many students complaining to DOSs after teachers had taught ‘swear lessons’ even after the class asked for a lesson and a teacher has explained that it may offend. The students who tend to want to learn swearing are those who are making an effort to integrate into Kiwi society and want to “fit in” at the skate park/basketball court etc. and those that complain or disapprove tend to be those students focusing on academic/exam preparation and don’t see the relevance or those who are strongly religious, hence avoiding words like ‘God’ and ‘hell’.”*

*“If you are not going to be offended by these words, then I have no problem teaching you these words. On the other hand, if you are going to be offended and potentially cause me hassles with my job, then go somewhere else to learn swear words.”*

These comments tend to suggest that in many ESOL departments guidelines or policies regarding the teaching of Taboo English to L2 learners are scarce. However, once again, future research is required to substantiate this claim. This research question also elicited some very interesting and, at times, rather questionable strategies teachers reported using to address taboo words. These strategies are illustrated in the following table.

**Table 8. Strategies Used by ESOL Teachers to Teach about Taboo English**

	<b>Explanation</b>	<b>Pronunciation</b>	<b>How it is used/ context</b>	<b>Synonyms</b>
<b>shit</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I would explain that it is inappropriate.</li> <li>- Explain the literal meaning. 'Shit' means 'excrement' or 'faeces'.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Do pronunciation work with 'shit' and 'sheet', 'shit' and 'ship'.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Give sentence. The weather was shit at the weekend.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Teach synonyms for shit e.g. shit, poo, dung, stool, liquid, solid, pee, piddle, wee wee.</li> </ul>
<b>bastard</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Explain the literal meaning. 'Bastard' is a descriptive term used to describe a child whose father's identity is unknown.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Teach pronunciation of 'fuck' and 'fax'.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Teach learners that 'fuck' is used to show anger as in 'fuck off!'.</li> <li>- Teach different functions including 'fucker' (noun), 'fucked' (verb) and 'fucked up' (phrasal verb to make a mistake).</li> </ul>	
<b>piss</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I might explain 'piss off'.</li> </ul>			
<b>fuck</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I would try and avoid this because it can sound bad and can be used very offensively.</li> </ul>			
<b>bugger</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I would not explain the literal meaning!</li> <li>- Teach literal meaning. 'Bugger' is a crude word for a sexual practice.</li> <li>- I would ask students to look up 'sodomy' in their dictionaries.</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I would show the 'Toyota Bugger Ad' to the class.</li> <li>- Teach students the word is commonly used to express a number of emotions like surprise, disappointment, and not its original meaning.</li> <li>- Japanese students have a word in their language with a similar pronunciation with the same original meaning. I would explain the use of this word as students may be confused when hearing this word in everyday speech.</li> <li>- Explain 'bugger' and 'buggery'.</li> </ul>	
<b>hell</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Explain that it is a religious word.</li> <li>- Explain heaven vs hell.</li> </ul>			

#### **5.5.4 Worksheet to teach about Taboo English**

The findings of this study have direct implications for the ESOL classroom. The classroom is a safe environment that allows learners to experiment and improve their language skills. Discouraging the discussions about the use of taboo words is an uninformative approach in a class focussing on everyday conversational English. The aim is not to encourage learners to actively use taboo language, but to assist learners to develop a passive understanding of this feature of the English language. The following worksheet, designed by the researcher, is a practical example of how taboo words can be addressed in the L2 classroom.

## Discussion

Discuss the statements below.  
Do you agree? Why or why not?

1. Most English swear words are about sex or parts of the body.
2. We can hear a lot of swear words on movies and on TV.
3. Men swear more often than women.
4. Young people swear more often than older people.
5. We can only swear when we are angry.

## Language

Which of the following are swear words?

- |             |            |
|-------------|------------|
| 1. fuck     | 6. pig     |
| 2. dog      | 7. jerk    |
| 3. shit     | 8. bastard |
| 4. arsehole | 9. fart    |
| 5. bummer   | 10. crap   |

How Offensive Are Swear Words?

Look at these words. How offensive do you think they are? Grade them from 1-5. Number 1 is the least offensive word and number 5 is the most offensive word.

- a) fuck
- b) shit
- c) cunt
- d) bitch
- e) bugger

## Language In Use

What words might you hear in the following situations? Circle the best answer.



1. A Kiwi friend has just bought a new car. He goes for a ride. He gets home and parks his car but crashes into a fence. What might he say?

- a) Fuck off!
- b) Oh, fuck!
- c) Fuck up!
- d) Fuck you!

2. Your Kiwi friend is having an argument with a neighbour. He is very angry. What might he say?

- a) Go to hell, you bloody!
- b) Go to hell, you piss off!
- c) Go to hell, you bastard!
- d) Go to hell, you hell.

3. Your Kiwi friend needs to find a pen quickly to write down an important telephone number but she can't find a pen in her bag. What might she say?

- a) Bitch!
- b) Bastard!
- c) Wanker!
- d) Oh, shit!

Firstly, the worksheet aims to encourage learners to discuss the issue of age, gender and taboo use. Learners then discuss the differences between taboo words and slang and rank the offensiveness of commonly heard taboo words. The final exercise provides learners with the opportunity to discuss the context of use of taboo words. Teachers can also discuss the pronunciation, definition and common collocations of taboo words. A brain storming activity to elicit further examples of taboo language may also reveal surprising results about a students' knowledge of Taboo English.

I argue that taboo language needs to be analysed in order to create language awareness. As taboo language is seldom covered in class or mentioned in textbooks, perhaps teachers need to be armed with alternative methods, such as using television. According to Vanderplank (1993:10), television is one of the most under-utilised resources in the second-language classroom "despite being one of the most important conveyors of popular culture, language, values, beliefs, and attitudes." Movies also seem to be a primary source of bad language and, as Mercury (1995: 35) states, second-language learners may get a distorted idea of the use of swear words due to "the influence of movies, where obscene language seems to flow unchecked." Teachers need to explain the complicated functions of taboo words heard at the movies and on television. Television shows such as "The Osbornes", "South Park" or the "Sopranos" could be an effective resource to use when approaching Taboo English in the classroom. Teachers could increase students' exposure to the status of speakers, the social restrictions demonstrated in certain situations, and the functions of Taboo English.

This type of information could assist learners understand why native speakers may use Taboo English on one occasion but not on another. It would be especially useful in the ESL classroom for students to collect their own data of Taboo English. If a teacher is embarrassed, he/she could have a colleague record taboo words onto a cassette tape. It is clear this area of language is sensitive, thus, a sensitive approach is required to introduce and teach taboo words and phrases. It is important to inform learners of the content of Taboo English lessons beforehand and provide alternative activities/assignments for learners who do not wish to attend as they may find the Taboo English lessons embarrassing or offensive. It is very important to stress that students have a choice about participation in such a discussion or lesson. In addition to being optional, I would suggest that Taboo English lessons are taught in single sex classes.

## 5.6 SUMMARY OF TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS TABOO ENGLISH IN THE L2 CLASSROOM

- The findings clearly show that the vast majority of ESOL teachers displayed very little enthusiasm for teaching about Taboo English in the L2 classroom despite acknowledging that taboo words are commonly heard in the public domain.
- 'Swearing lessons' were not a priority for most participants who consistently reported that they did not actively teach Taboo English. However, many participants were prepared to teach about the appropriate and inappropriate uses of taboo words, particularly the more innocuous words such as 'bugger' and 'bloody' when specifically asked by learners during a lesson.
- Overall, the 45+ females had the most positive attitude towards teaching about taboo words.
- On the whole, the younger teachers, particularly the 25-25 females demonstrated the most reluctance to address taboo words in the L2 classroom, despite frequently using this language in everyday conversation.
- A number of key reasons emerged for not teaching about Taboo English:
  - a) The idea of taboo lessons had never been considered.
  - b) Teachers felt inhibited using this language in the classroom.
  - c) Teachers believed L2 learners would acquire taboo language naturally.
  - d) Teachers believed that L2 learners would feel 'uncomfortable' about learning about taboo words.
  - e) Teachers did not want to offend their students by teaching bad language.
  - f) Teachers were reluctant to teach about taboo words for fear of being reproached by colleagues and management. They were also unsure of department guidelines regarding the teaching of taboo words.
  - g) There is a lack of materials available to teach about Taboo English.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **6.1 CHAPTER OVERVIEW**

This chapter summarises the major research findings that were discussed in Chapters Four and Five. The implications of the study are also discussed in relation to theory, classroom pedagogy and teacher training courses. Finally, the limitations of the study are discussed and recommendations for future research are presented.

#### **6.2 KEY FINDINGS**

This study has investigated 80 ESOL teachers' attitudes towards the use of Taboo English in society and their attitudes towards teaching about these taboo words in the L2 classroom. In addition, the researcher has also repeatedly illustrated why there is a need to teach about these taboo words in the L2 classroom.

The first section of this thesis investigated the attitudes of the ESOL teachers towards the use of Taboo English in society. The teachers were in wide agreement that taboo language is commonly heard in society and is becoming increasingly pervasive in the media. In addition, many teachers were of the belief that the media has been very influential in changing public attitude towards the acceptability of certain words into everyday informal conversation. The results also showed that Taboo English was a valuable aspect of ESOL teachers' linguistic repertoire and that both males and females used taboo words in complex and diverse ways to communicate ideas quickly and efficiently. Regardless of age or gender, the majority of participants commonly employed taboo words to express surprise, annoyance or frustration.

One of the key findings of the study contradicted the typical stereotype that females are more conservative in their taboo use than males. Overall, it was found that males used taboo words slightly more frequently than females. In general, there was little difference

in the strength of the taboo words employed by each gender. The difference lay in the use of specific words such as 'fuck', 'cunt' and 'mother-fucker.' There was a clear gender divide regarding the use of 'cunt' and 'mother-fucker.' These two words convey negative images of women and were seldom used by the female participants in the study. The findings also suggest that age rather than gender, influences a speaker's use of Taboo English. The younger males and females consistently reported using taboo language more frequently than their older counterparts. It became evident that the younger males, in particular, favoured the use of 'fuck' to create solidarity and indicate in-group membership. Furthermore, as these participants were generally white middle class and educated, it could be argued that taboo words are not only used by the lower classes or under-educated. Instead, the use of taboo language transcends gender, age and educational backgrounds. However, further research is required to see how widespread this finding is.

The second section of the study showed that there was linguistic prejudice towards teaching about Taboo English in the second language classroom. ESOL teachers appeared to have far more rigorous standards regarding taboo words in the second language classroom than many did in their own lives. The vast majority of ESOL teachers in the study displayed little, if any, enthusiasm for teaching about taboo words to adult learners of conversational English despite acknowledging that taboo words are frequently heard in society today. Another significant finding, is the apparent 'generation gap' in attitudes towards the use of taboo language in everyday situations and attitudes towards teaching this language to L2 students. While the younger generation generally had a more liberal approach towards taboo words in everyday conversations, the 45+ females saw the greatest pedagogical benefit of addressing Taboo English in the L2 classroom.

Very few teachers initiated specific lessons focussing on taboo language. While teachers were not prepared to actively teach about taboo words, many, though not all, were prepared to explain the appropriate and inappropriate uses of taboo words when specifically asked by learners during a lesson. Teachers were reluctant to teach about taboo words for a number of key reasons. The most common reason for not addressing Taboo English in the L2 classroom was the fear of offending learners by teaching about words that were 'embarrassing', 'bad' and 'offensive.' Teachers were also reluctant to address taboo words for fear of being reproached by colleagues and management.

Moreover, many of the ESOL teachers held the view that L2 learners did not require direct instruction on Taboo English as they would acquire this language naturally by immersion.

Another factor that hindered the teaching of taboo words was the ESOL teachers' own ethical dilemma. Teachers who admitted using taboo words in their own conversations, felt extremely inhibited in using taboo language in the classroom, stressing that they would find it particularly difficult to talk about the literal meanings of taboo words. Others felt inhibited in using taboo words in the class fearing that they would be seen in a different light by the learners for using this informal register. Some almost perceived themselves to be 'linguistic gate-keepers' and considered the classroom to be a 'swear-word-free zone'. Possibly language teachers perceived themselves as enforcers of standard linguistic norms, viewing their principal linguistic responsibility as one of inculcating "correct language" (McGroarty, 1996: 25).

Some teachers also feared that they were teaching substandard or even 'lazy' English and that a Taboo English word was a poor substitute from the mental lexicon. However, Jay (2000) opposes this idea and argues that speakers do not use taboo English words because their mental lexicon is impoverished but rather because neurological, psychological and socio-cultural factors compel them to curse. Other ESOL teachers held the view that it was not necessary for learners to know this linguistic area of English as there were more important lesson objectives.

Others reported that they had simply never considered the idea of actively teaching taboo words. The results also suggested that a lack of teaching materials addressing this aspect of language may deter teachers from having Taboo English lessons. It could be argued that teachers are left out on a 'pedagogical limb' when it comes to teaching about Taboo English as they are left to follow their intuition on the best approach to address this language. As this is an undesirable situation for many ESOL teachers, they may simply refrain from addressing this controversial issue in the L2 classroom.

Finally, I have illustrated that the English language has a rich and colourful repertoire of swear words that are used in everyday natural conversation. I have also shown that there is a need for teachers to integrate this linguistic feature into their curriculums. Perhaps teachers of adult learners of conversational English who aim to empower adult learners

to understand every day language they will be exposed to in the 'real' world need to reassess their attitudes and practices. I argue that by not addressing this controversial language, teachers are insufficiently preparing learners to become empowered communicators in English. Teachers need to take a more candid approach towards teaching about taboo words and at least provide learners with the opportunity to attend lessons on Taboo English. The classroom is a safe place where second language speakers can rehearse and make mistakes without serious implications, a rehearsal for the real world situation. Teachers need to explain the complicated uses of Taboo English in open and objective discussions. Needless to say, sensitivity towards teaching about this taboo topic is paramount.

In conclusion, whether one holds the view that taboo language is the poetry of everyday life or a sign of mental poverty, its presence in society today cannot be denied. While only some native speakers may use bad language, all know about its subtleties and if teachers are unwilling to teach learners about the potential use of taboo words commonly found in the English language, they are leaving the students unprepared for life in an English speaking society.

### **6.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

Little, if any research appears to have been done on this taboo topic and its teaching implications in the L2 classroom and there are definite gaps in the literature. I have been unable to find any studies that have investigated the attitudes of ESOL teachers towards teaching about Taboo English to adult learners of conversational English. Therefore, I have been unable to duplicate or even adapt the methodology or research questions that have been used in previous studies. Nor has it been possible to test a hypothesis developed in previous studies. Thus, I hope that the results of this research could extend the theory and expand generalisations in the field of ESOL teaching.

In addition, I hope the study has clearly demonstrated that language is a carrier of culture and understanding culture is integral to learning and understanding a language (Wardhaugh, 1998). Language simultaneously reflects and encodes social and cultural patterns and speakers need knowledge of culture in order to function in a particular

Community of Practice. Social knowledge such as this allows speakers to express their social identity, social competence as well as an understanding of different social situations (Romaine, 2000). Taboo words are engraved in our culture and are becoming an increasingly sociolinguistic norm of society. Taboo language is an undeniable reality of English language use. The use of Taboo English by speakers in society today appears to be more prevalent than ever. It is a fact that, in society today, L2 learners will inevitably hear taboo words in everyday conversation, whether it be on the street, on television, in songs and music videos or at the movies. Register (1996:44) adds that L2 learners may also see taboo words on travel souvenirs, bumper stickers, on T-shirts “or liberally scribbled amidst public graffiti or splashed over the internet.”

If it is taken that this linguistic area is a core element of English and understanding taboo words is necessary to fully comprehend the host culture, then it is clear that ESOL teachers preparing adult learners to understand the target language must address Taboo English in some capacity.

## **6.4 PEDAGOGICAL AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS**

### **6.4.1 Implications for classroom practice**

The findings of this study are also of significance for the ESOL classroom and provide practical ways to teach about this taboo topic including vocabulary exercises focussing on functional aspects of taboo language. The results of this study have also highlighted the pedagogic antipathy ESOL teachers have towards teaching about Taboo English. I hope that these results will encourage teacher discussion, hence creating awareness surrounding the importance of teaching about swearing to L2 learners of conversational English.

While the playground, the sports fields, the streets, the internet and television are good mediums to enhance taboo vocabulary, I believe it is unsatisfactory to assume learners will acquire socially appropriate taboo language ‘naturally.’ How do these L2 learners know what is and isn’t a swear word? Furthermore, how do they know what words are

offensive or what their children can or shouldn't say? In order to reduce the possibility of misunderstanding and the misuse of taboo words, language considered shocking or inappropriate may need to be taught directly. This is supported by Andersson and Trudgill (1990:8) who stress that "it must be the duty of the school to point out that certain types of language are not very appropriate in some situations of life."

Furthermore, I argue that taboo lessons will greatly benefit learners. However, the point is not to teach learners to become active users of taboo language, but to help them understand what constitutes a taboo word and why native speakers choose to use this language (Mercury, 1995). By definition many taboo words are offensive. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to address this vocabulary in the classroom. It could be argued that teachers may be doing more potential harm than good by not addressing these lexemes of the linguistic underworld. This is reiterated by Register (1996: 44-45) who states that by not teaching about taboo words teachers "may do learners more communicative harm than good, as it puts them (learners) at a disadvantage when dealing with native speakers who use them (taboo words) as a matter of course."

Learners need to be given the option of whether or not to attend Taboo English classes. In addition, to being optional, I would also suggest that Taboo English lessons are taught in single gender classes (Crooks, 1998).

#### **6.4.2 Implications for ESOL textbook publishers**

The ESOL publishing field constitutes a large and growing industry, consisting of over a dozen publishing houses, producing a great volume of new materials each year. Literature shows that the unifying concept is that language is learned predominantly through actual use and Brumfit (1984) emphasises that textbook conversational activities used in the second language classroom should be "as close as possible to those used by native speakers" (cited in Newman, 1996: 1). However, I argue that by omitting Taboo English, the majority of pedagogical texts used in second language classrooms (L2) fail to reflect the reality of real-time conversation. This study has provided practical ways of teaching aspects of Taboo English and exercises could be incorporated

into pedagogical texts to ensure this area of language is addressed and thus reflect the reality of natural conversation.

### **6.4.3 Implications for teacher training courses**

This research could also be of significance for ESOL teacher training classes. These programmes focus on training teachers to meet the needs of the learners in the L2 classroom by providing the trainee with tools to teach the skills of listening, reading, writing and speaking. Perhaps when focussing on conversational English, these teacher training courses could introduce a new module such as ‘Teaching About Taboo Language In The ESOL Classroom.’

## **6.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

Every research method has its limitations. I recognise and acknowledge the epistemological problems associated with a self-response questionnaire as a method of data collection. The subjective nature of this inquiry is by definition going to impinge on the objective reliability of the results. Self reporting by the subjects has its obvious weaknesses. One of the biggest limitations of this study is the question of whether or not participants were able to talk honestly about this topic given its taboo nature. Were they willing to truthfully answer questions about their use of taboo words? Furthermore, the findings of this study were not based on recorded authentic spoken data and the question must be asked if participants really knew how they used taboo language. However, as my goals were more to do with charting general tendencies, what participants believe they do with regard to Taboo English is as interesting and as important as what they actually do. Furthermore, I am aware that the quality of this data collection method is highly dependent on the ‘goodness’ of the questions in the questionnaire (Neuman, 2000). While the questionnaire elicited a considerable amount of data, the limitations in terms of generalisability of the findings need to be acknowledged. A combination of different data collection methods such as the use of questionnaires, follow-up interviews

and classroom observations would have increased the validity and reliability of the results of the current study.

## **6.6 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

Taboo English is a fertile ground for investigation and more needs to be done to contribute to this discussion in the form of research and publications. I hope this study provides information and encouragement for future researchers. This study has raised a number of questions and it would be of value to investigate the following through future research:

- What are ESOL students' attitudes towards the use of taboo words heard in society?
- Do female ESOL students use taboo words less frequently than ESOL male students?
- What are ESOL students' sources and information about taboo words?
- What are ESOL students' recognition levels of taboo words?
- How do L2 learners and native speakers perceive the same taboo word in terms of offensiveness?
- Do migrants have a greater knowledge of taboo words than international students?
- Do ESOL students use taboo words outside the classroom, and if so, what is the function of their use?
- Does an ESOL student's knowledge of taboo language vary depending on sociocultural factors such as nationality, age, gender, religion and socio-economic background?
- What are ESOL students' attitudes towards learning about Taboo English in the L2 classroom?

- What taboo words in English do ESOL students consider important and not important to learn about in the L2 classroom?
- How do ESOL students acquire taboo words?
- What are the attitudes of non-native ESOL teachers towards the teaching of Taboo English?
- What guidelines, if any, do ESOL teachers follow regarding the teaching of Taboo English?

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## APPENDIX A



### Participant Information Sheet

#### WHAT ARE TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE TEACHING OF TABOO ENGLISH IN THE SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM?

I am studying a MA in Applied Languages at the Auckland University Of Technology (AUT) and as part of my assessment I am required to carry out a research project for a thesis.

The aim of my project is to investigate teachers' attitudes towards the teaching of taboo English in the second language classroom. As the project is about 'bad' language you need to be warned that you will be asked questions concerning words that you may find offensive.

Participants for the study are native speakers of English presently teaching non-native speaking learners. I have designed a questionnaire and would really appreciate it if you could take a moment to fill it in. At a later date I may also invite you to participate in a short follow-up interview to ask questions about your responses to the questionnaire.

Your responses will be treated confidentially as I am not permitted to use your name in the reporting of my project. You will also not be able to be individually identified. You may view the completed questionnaire or interview transcript if you wish.

You are also free to withdraw from the project at any time. There is no risk to you involved in participating in the project, and, no cost other than the time required for you to complete the questionnaire and/or interview.

As part of the research regulations at AUT, I must obtain a signed consent form from everyone I survey. This form is also attached so could I also ask you to sign, date and return it to me. Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Dr. John Bitchener on 917-99999 ext. 6830. Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary, AUTEK, Madeline Banda, [madeline.banda@aut.ac.nz](mailto:madeline.banda@aut.ac.nz), 917 9999 ext 8044.

As there are deadlines for me to meet for this project, I would really appreciate it if you could possibly return these to me by \_\_\_\_\_2003. I certainly understand how busy you all are and greatly appreciate your time and effort. I sincerely hope that your responses will make a contribution to the field of ESOL teaching.

Thank you for considering this invitation.  
Yours sincerely,

Dianna Holster  
Telephone: 917-999999 ext. 6805.

**Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 18 February 2003 AUTEK Reference number 03/02**

## APPENDIX B



### Consent to Participation in Research

**Title of Project:** What Are Teachers' Attitudes Towards The Teaching Of Taboo English In The Second Language Classroom?

**Project Supervisor:** Dr. John Bitchener

**Researcher:** Dianna Holster

- 
- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project. I am aware that the project is about language that may be considered offensive. I have been warned that the project is about swear words in English and I will be asked questions in a questionnaire concerning words that I may find offensive.
  - I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
  - I understand that at a later date I may be invited to participate in a short follow-up interview to discuss my questionnaire responses. I understand this interview will be audio-taped and transcribed.
  - I understand that I may withdraw myself or any information that I have provided for this project at any time prior to completion of data collection, without being disadvantaged in any way. If I withdraw, I understand that all relevant tapes and transcripts, or parts thereof, will be destroyed.
  -

**I agree to take part in this research.**

I agree to take part in this research.

Participant signature: .....

Participant name: .....

Date: .....

**Dianna Holster**

ESOL Lecturer, School of Languages,  
Auckland University Of Technology (AUT).  
Tel: (09) 917-9999 ext. 6805

Project Supervisor Contact Details: Dr. John Bitchener, School of Languages,  
Auckland University of Technology (AUT). Tel: (09) 917-9999 ext. 7830

**Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 18  
February 2003 AUTEK Reference number 03/02**



**QUESTIONNAIRE**

**PART A:                    DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION**

1) Are you                    Male                      
    Female                   

2) Are you                    25 – 35 yrs                      
    45 + years                   

3) What is your ethnic origin?  
 \_\_\_\_\_

4) Is English your first language?  
    Yes                      
    No                   

5) If English is not your first language, please state what your first language is.  
 \_\_\_\_\_

6) How long have you been teaching ESOL? \_\_\_\_\_

7) What course are you presently teaching?

English for Academic Purposes	<input type="checkbox"/>
Employment English	<input type="checkbox"/>
Business English	<input type="checkbox"/>
General English (Migrant students)	<input type="checkbox"/>
General English (Refugees)	<input type="checkbox"/>
General English (International students)	<input type="checkbox"/>
IELTS	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other	<input type="checkbox"/>

**OTHER** \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**PART B:**

**GRADE THE FOLLOWING WORDS FROM 1-5.**

- 1) Look at the following list of words. Tick **one** box for every word. Grade the words from least to most offensive. (**1 is totally inoffensive and 5 is totally offensive**).

	<b>GRADE 1</b> (Totally inoffensive)	<b>GRADE 2</b> (Slightly offensive)	<b>GRADE 3</b> (Moderately offensive)	<b>GRADE 4</b> (Very offensive)	<b>GRADE 5</b> (Totally offensive)
ape					
arsehole					
bastard					
bitch					
bloody					
bugger					
bummer					
crap					
cunt					
dick					
fart					
fuck (+variants)					
hell					
jerk					
Jesus Christ					
mother- fucker					
piss off (+variants)					
shit					
up yours					
wanker					

2) How often, if at all, do you think university students might hear these words on campus?

	<b>NEVER</b>	<b>SOMETIMES</b>	<b>OFTEN</b>
shit			
bastard			
bloody			
God			
fuck (+variants)			
bugger			
hell			
piss (+variants)			

**Other/Comment** \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

3) How often, if at all, do you think people who work in a factory might hear these words at work?

	<b>NEVER</b>	<b>SOMETIMES</b>	<b>OFTEN</b>
shit			
bastard			
bloody			
God			
fuck (+variants)			
bugger			
hell			
piss (+variants)			

**Other/Comment** \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

4) How often, if at all, do you think pedestrians might hear these words on the street as they pass by?

	<b>NEVER</b>	<b>SOMETIMES</b>	<b>OFTEN</b>
shit			
bastard			
bloody			
God			
fuck (+variants)			
bugger			
hell			
piss (+variants)			

**Other/Comment** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



4) If at all, why do you use the following words? You may tick more than one box). Please add other swear words that you use.

	<b>To express surprise/ annoyance or frustration</b>	<b>To intensify adjectives</b>	<b>To express a serious insult</b>	<b>To express a jocular insult</b>	<b>I don't use this word</b>
ape					
arsehole					
bastard					
bitch					
bloody					
bugger					
bullshit					
bummer					
crap					
cunt					
dick					
fart					
fuck +(variants)					
hangi pants					
hell					
jerk					
Jesus Christ					
mother- fucker					
piss off (+variants)					
shit					
teke					
teko					
up yours					
wanker					





3. Tick the words that you consider important to teach about in the classroom.

	<b>Important</b>
shit	
bastard	
bloody	
God	
fuck (+variants)	
bugger	
hell	
piss (+variants)	

**Why or why not?**

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4) Tick the words that you do not teach about to your class in any context?

	<b>Do not teach</b>
shit	
bastard	
bloody	
God	
fuck (+variants)	
bugger	
hell	
piss (+variants)	

**Why or why not?**

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5) Please tick how you would deal with the following words if you overheard a student using the word in the classroom or if a student specifically brought up the word during a lesson.

	<b>Ignore it</b>	<b>Explain where it is appropriate and inappropriate to use</b>	<b>Teach the pronunciation, grammar and collocation</b>	<b>Teach the function and give further examples</b>	<b>Other</b>
shit					
bastard					
bloody					
God					
fuck (+variants)					
bugger					
hell					
piss (+variants)					

**Comment**

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