

# The Utilisation of Profanity Among Malaysian University Students

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**Abstract:** *In Malaysia, the use of swearing is something that is frowned upon its offensiveness, but university students have been seen to use profanity. This study is interested to find out to what extent this is prevented among students from The Faculty of Islamic Studies and English Language Studies. It intends to investigate whether both faculties use English swear words and Malay swear words, their reasons behind the use of them and frequency use of swear words when they communicate. A questionnaire is used to collect data and the data will be analysed through descriptive statistic. The theory used in this research is Timothy Jay's, Neuro – Psycho – Social theory (NPS) of cursing. Findings shows the differences use of swear words among students from FPI and ELS where FPI students prefer to use Malay swear words and ELS students use English swear words more. Despite FPI students are more preserved, they still tend to use swear words to express their feelings and this is the same as ELS students. The result also revealed that FPI and ELS students stated that the reasons behind their use of swear are because of media and peer influence. Finally, FPI students are seen to be more careful when it comes to profanity while ELS students are freer when using profanity.*

**Keywords:** profanity, swear words

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## 1. Introduction

In Malaysia, the use profanity is considered offensive in every culture. Profanity or swearing does not belong in the Malaysian culture as it is directly related to using taboo words (Azman et al., 2017). Unlike in the United States, it is common to develop swearing habit in the early stage of childhood (DeFrank and Kahlbaugh, 2019). However, English swear words and Malay swear words are seen to be used even among students. Profanity is commonly used by university students since they are generation Y and they like to explore new things. Interestingly, some students might not know a certain language but they know how to swear in that language. For instance, the word 'stupid' is in English which everyone in Malaysia is aware of but they would also know the word 'Muttal' which also means stupid in Tamil. Students in Malaysia are expanding to Tamil, Mandarin, English and Malay language since these are the prominent languages in Malaysia.

Nowadays, the way people communicate is different from the old days; new words are being formed, coined every day and these words come from the use of technology; for example the word Google and Photoshop. Besides that, there are also other words from other sources as well and they now create their own words and how they want to use it, it up to them. But, when people start to adapt to the modern culture, several bad words have been created. Those bad words are specifically called profanity or offensive language. Profanities are defined as taboo words that brings out negative connotation and are used to convey emotions through different

context (Azman et al., 2017). In America, profanity is referred as obscene, offensive or taboo language by the public. Despite it being taboo, swearing in the modern era is now considered as something common to the ears of the public since everyone is familiar with swear words. When people use profanity or swear publicly, it is now considered common in our society (DeFrank and Kahlbaugh, 2019).

Even these days, many people believe that young people are less polite but the degree of offensiveness depends on the hearer. If the whole family, were to use profanity, it can be very common to the speaker and the speaker may use it very often too. Whether swear words are offensive or not, no one would really know since it still depends on the individual. It is believed that, students use more profanity nowadays compared than before as it is a primary psychological tools that help students express their emotional states (DeFrank and Kahlbaugh, 2019).

Since profanity is considered a negative influence at University level because according to our culture, not only Malay but every race in Malaysia, it is considered as negative or offensive. However, it has been observed that most students in Malaysia find profanity as somewhat a normal thing since they tend to use it in their life for example word like '*Bodoh*' is commonly used in the Malaysian society to depict a certain humour in their daily life conversation. Thus, this study is done to find the difference in the use of profanity among students from The Faculty of Islamic Studies (FPI) and English Language Studies (ELS) from the National University of Malaysia. Besides, this research is also done to investigate what kind of profanity words do they use and the degree of profanity from the highest to lowest as there are still not many studies on swearing in the Asian context.

## 2. Literature Review

### Usage of Swearing

There are negative and positive uses of profanity among students in universities. This is since politeness is always viewed as something that is a part of the Malaysian culture (Azman et al., 2020) and that shows how people in Malaysia are still discreet about using profanity. Azman et al., (2020) also supports this notion as it stated that despite young people nowadays are more social, they still practice politeness in their conversation. However, language can be used in many intriguing ways, and this include swearing. Even the word 'Fuck' has become famous in Malaysia, and it is common to hear youth say 'Fuck'. There are six categories that Marsden (2009) state on the usage of profanity which are shown below:

1. Social: As a manner of speaking which would promote group solidarity and is accepted as the norm within the group.
2. Emphatic: As a mean of emphasizing a person's feeling about something.
3. Humorous: As a humorous aid typically occurs with group laughter's and storytelling sequence.
4. Aggressive: Used as an insult to threaten and ridicule. It aims is to use it as a weapon against the hearer.

5. Humour / Aggressive: Used as a form of teasing but the joke may be aggressive. It does not intend to harm the speaker.
6. Monologue: This is directed towards the speaker himself or towards the universe in general since there is no hearer.

This shows that even profanity can be used in a productive way and how it wants to be used depends on the speaker. This supported by Jdetawy (2019) as he claims that despite there are several classifications of bad language, it is still commonly used by people as a tool to express their emotions towards something. In Malaysia, we can see many people swear in streets, schools, universities and even workplace; there most swear words that are being used among teenagers are *shit* and *damn*. This is supported by Azman et al. (2019) as it is a norm to see Malaysian's use swear words especially the youth since they will only use it if there is a reason in doing so.

### **The Effect of Swearing**

There are many factors that affect a speaker when they swear or even a hearer when they hear a person swearing. Even public can be affected by profanity whether they realize it or not. When an individual swears, Jdetawy (2019) stated they want to show people who they are, diminished depression and create an identity. Aside from that, people often use swearing as a mean to bring out their emotions that has been pent for long and it can also give pain relief (Stephens and Robertson, 2020). The effect on swearing can be classified in five different types stated by Pinker (2008) below

1. Dysphemistic swearing  
Listeners think about the negative or provocative matter. When using the wrong euphemism, it would lead to a dysphemistic effect.  
Example: He is fucking her!
2. Abusive swearing  
Swear words that are used for insulting and provoking people with the intention of hurting that person's feeling.  
Example: Fuck you bitch
3. Idiomatic swearing  
Swear words used that does not really refer to a matter but having the idea to show off or to stir interest.  
Example: Ah, fuck, man.
4. Emphatic swearing  
Swear words that are uttered to emphasize something.  
Example: The movie was so fucking awesome!
5. Cathartic swearing  
Swearing occurs when an incident happens whether the speaker realize it or not. It also meant to tell the audience that you're undergoing a negative emotion.  
Example: Shit!

Through this, it can be seen that there are many levels of effect when a person swears. It depends on what their intention is to see whether the hearers have an effect on it or not. This is

quite different from university level. If a lecturer swears, would it affect the student's use of language or if it does, it may not give any effect at all. As Azman et al, (2019) describe that swearing is normal in Malaysian university since it is no tabooer to Malaysian youth. Nevertheless, this depends on how harsher the language is, as people may react to the swear words if it unpleasant to the listener (DeFrank and Kahlbaugh, 2019). This shows that that the effect of swearing can happen on the hearer of such words. Bystanders are not invisible people; they can hear and see everything around them, and it depends on how they react towards their surroundings.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Timothy Jay introduced the neuro-psycho-social theory (NPS) of cursing. Through this theory, Jay (2000) has come up with three aspects of cursing which are neurological, psychological and socio-cultural aspects. It is meant to prepare to explain why people curse and why they choose those sorts of words when cursing.

From the neurological aspect, it stated that cursing is controlled by the brain since it is from the subcortical system. Ardo (2001) explains how Jay's neurological aspects affect the emotional response of a speaker and hearer through cursing. It provides automatic response to pain, surprise, happiness and some other emotions from the right hemisphere of the brain (Ardo, 2001).

The psychological aspects of cursing discussed the aftermath of cursing. According to Jay (2000), different cultures and different language gives different sets of linguistics and semantic constrain on dirty words. Hence, psychological aspects explain the cultural development that deals with a person's personality and religion. This may relate to the Malaysian culture since the usage of profanity is banned among youth and university students. It also relates to whether they feel ashamed or not when using profanity because psychological aspects deal with the effect of cursing. It leads to understanding the feelings of students after they use swear words intentionally or unintentionally.

The socio-cultural aspects, profound that each culture has developed its own criteria for what is considered profanity (Jay, 2000). Since cultural context does give a huge impact towards children's upbringing, especially in Malaysia, the citizens of Malaysia tend to pay attention to their family's ethics. But now int the modern world, it is believed that teenagers do not look up to those ethics. That is why they can freely use profanity publicly. Yet, it is neither in the Malay, Indian and Chinese culture to teach profanity among their children and it is generally banned from using it at home.

Through this, NPS theory has explained how profanity is formed. Jay (2000) even said that the NPS theory is designed to give information about cursing behavior in social and cultural and cultural context. Therefore, a person's style of cursing will be from both shared and private experience (Jay, 2000).

### **3. Methodology**

In this study, quantitative method was used to gather information and findings for the research. The type of questionnaire used is a structure questionnaire that helps to elicit the quantitative data. A total of 60 subjects answered the research survey: 30 subjects from FPI and 30 other subjects from ELS. The 60 subjects compromised of both gender, male and female since this is not a gender perspective study. The selections of students were based on the willingness of

the participants in answering the questionnaire. Using questionnaire does not restrict respondent in answering on what kind of swear words do they use (Azman et al., 2019).

### Frequent Use of Profanity

**Table 1: English swear words used by FPI subjects**

ENGLISH SWEAR WORDS (FPI STUDENTS)				
	ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	NEVER
1. Fuck	-	-	40	60
2. Bullshit	-	3	23	73
3. Motherfucker	-	-	10	90
4. My ass	-	-	10	90
5. Shit	7	3	43	47
6. Dick	-	-	10	90
7. Scumbag	-	-	7	93
8. Damn	17	10	23	50
9. Bitch	-	7	20	73
10. Suck	-	13	10	77
11. Nuthead	-	-	7	93
12. Idiot	7	10	23	60
13. Stupid	3	13	40	43
14. Son of bitch	-	-	3	97
15. Slut	-	-	7	93
16. Asshole	-	-	7	93
17. VJJ	-	-	-	-
18. Bastard	-	3	13	83
19. Dimwit	-	-	10	90
20. The hell	10	3	13	73
21. Faggot	-	3	7	90
22. Shitfaced	-	-	3	97
23. Skank	-	-	3	97
24. Pussy	-	-	7	93
25. Twat	-	-	-	-

Table 1 shows that not many of English swear words are being used by FPI students. There are only five swear words that FPI tick for ‘Always’ used which are Shit (7%), Damn (17%), Idiot (7%), Stupid (3%) and the hell (10%). It is quite surprising that ‘Stupid’ has the lowest percentage for the use of always since it is considered as the mildest form of swearing while ‘Fuck’ is rarely used when it was rated as one of the funniest words in the word (Stephens and Robertson, 2020). FPI students who are believed to be cautious when they talk, chose the swear word ‘Damn’ instead. On the other hand, there are three swear words which FPI students never use which are ‘Son of bitch’, ‘Shitfaced’ and ‘Skank’. All of the three words have the same percentage which is 97%.

**Table 2: English swear words used by ELS subjects**

ENGLISH SWEAR WORDS (FPI STUDENTS)				
	ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	NEVER
1. Fuck	37	27	30	7
2. Bullshit	17	17	60	7
3. Motherfucker	3	10	50	37
4. My ass	13	23	43	20

5. Shit	<b>63</b>	20	17	-
6. Dick	-	10	50	40
7. Scumbag	7	-	30	63
8. Damn	47	23	27	3
9. Bitch	20	33	33	13
10. Suck	20	23	47	10
11. Nuthead	-	7	10	<b>83</b>
12. Idiot	30	10	40	20
13. Stupid	37	30	30	3
14. Son of bitch	10	7	40	43
15. Slut	7	7	27	60
16. Asshole	13	37	30	20
17. VJJ	3	7	27	63
18. Bastard	3	7	57	33
19. Dimwit	3	-	27	70
20. The hell	43	33	17	7
21. Faggot	3	7	17	73
22. Shitfaced	7	-	10	<b>83</b>
23. Skank	3	-	13	<b>83</b>
24. Pussy	3	7	43	47
25. Twat	3	3	20	73

Table 2 shows the frequent use of 25 English swear words by ELS students. ‘Shit’ has the highest percentage (63%) for ‘Always’ in English swear words. Besides, there are two words that ELS subjects do not always use which are ‘Nuthead’ and ‘Dick’. Furthermore, there are three words that most ELS subjects do not use which are ‘Nuthead’, ‘Shitfaced’ and ‘Skank’ which has the highest percentage (83%) for the variable ‘Never’. This shows that the word ‘Shit’ is being used daily among ELS subjects while they never use the word ‘Nuthead’, ‘Shitfaced’ or ‘Skank’ in all types of communication.

**Table 3: Malay swear words used by FPI Students**

<b>MALAY SWEAR WORDS (FPI STUDENTS)</b>				
	<b>ALWAYS</b>	<b>OFTEN</b>	<b>SOMETIMES</b>	<b>NEVER</b>
1. Babi	-	10	40	50
2. Pukimak	3	-	10	87
3. Bodoh	10	27	53	10
4. Sial	7	17	23	53
5. Bongok	<b>13</b>	30	37	20
6. Celaka	3	13	20	63
7. Haram jadah	3	3	23	70
8. Pantat	-	3	7	90
9. Taik	3	13	13	70
10. Setan	7	10	23	60
11. Pundek	-	3	10	87
12. Bangang	-	17	40	43
13. Lancau	-	7	3	90
14. Pergimampus	3	13	20	63
15. Cibai	7	7	23	63
16. Cipap	-	3	3	93
17. Sundal	-	3	3	93

18. Jalang	-	3	7	90
19. Lahanat	3	3	10	83
20. Bahlul	-	-	10	90
21. Bohsia	-	-	3	97
22. Peler	-	3	-	97
23. Bapuk	-	3	17	80
24. Kepala Butoh	-	-	-	100
25. Brekmok	-	-	-	100

As shown in Table 3, FPI subjects tend to always use the word '*Bongok*' since it has the highest percentage (13%). While there are four words that have the highest percentage for the variable 'Never' which are '*Bohsia*' (97%), '*Peler*' (97%), '*Kepala butoh*' (100%) and '*Brekmok*' (100%). The two words that received 100% in 'Never' shows that FPI subjects do not use that word at all.

**Table 4: Malay swear words used by ELS Students**  
**MALAY SWEAR WORDS (ELS STUDENTS)**

	ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	NEVER
1. Babi	23	23	37	17
2. Pukimak	13	13	20	53
3. Bodoh	43	27	27	3
4. Sial	23	17	30	30
5. Bongok	33	37	23	7
6. Celaka	17	20	23	40
7. Haram jadah	17	3	37	43
8. Pantat	10	10	20	60
9. Taik	10	37	27	27
10. Setan	17	10	23	60
11. Pundek	7	7	20	67
12. Bangang	20	20	43	17
13. Lancau	7	7	27	60
14. PergiMampus	20	23	40	17
15. Cibai	10	13	27	50
16. Cipap	3	-	17	80
17. Sundal	3	3	13	80
18. Jalang	-	3	13	83
19. Lahanat	3	7	40	50
20. Bahlul	3	-	27	70
21. Bohsia	-	-	13	87
22. Peler	-	10	17	73
23. Bapuk	-	10	27	63
24. Kepala Butoh	7	10	10	73
25. Brekmok	-	3	17	80

According to Table 4, it shows how frequent ELS subjects use Malay swear words and despite being believed that they are influence by the western culture, they still tend to use Malay swear words. 43% is the highest percentage for the use of '*Bodoh*' which means that ELS subject always use that word. '*Jalang*', '*Bohsia*', '*Peler*', '*Bapuk*' and '*Brekmok*' are words that ELS subjects do not always use since there were no percentages on the 'Always' variable.



### Reason for the Use of Swearing

When talking about communicating with other people, there must be a reason behind it. Same goes to when using a certain language and word. There must be a reason behind why FPI and ELS subject swear and the answers to reasons are given below.

**Table 5: Reason of swearing**

No	ITEM	FPI		ELS	
		YES (%)	NO (%)	YES (%)	NO (%)
1	Pain	13	87	67	33
2	Anger	57	43	97	3
3	Frustration	70	30	87	30
4	Annoyed	23	77	83	17
5	To emphasize a point	7	93	47	53
6	To joke	27	73	80	20
7	To make sexual reference	3	97	43	57
8	Happy	10	90	40	60
9	Excited	17	83	53	47
10	Shock	33	67	83	17

There must be a reason on why some subjects do not swear and why some swear. Table 5 shows the reasons behind on why subject from FPI and ELS swear. There are five main reasons on why ELS subjects use profanity which are because of ‘Anger’ (97%), ‘Frustration’ (87%), ‘Annoyed’ (83%), ‘To joke’ (80%) and ‘Shock’ (83%). Anger has the highest percentage because it is shown that feeling has a strong relation with profanity (Fledman et al., 2017). This also shows that ELS subject swear for a variety of reasons, not only because they are angry but also because they are happy or when they want to make a joke. While for FPI subjects, the highest percentage would be on the item ‘Frustration’ (70%) and ‘Anger’ (57%). This is because they are calmer when talking and only swear when they are angry. Besides that, 3% for sexual reference among FPI subjects while 40% for happy among ELS subjects. These two items have the lowest percentage since it is not the real reason on why the subjects’ uses swear words.

### 4. Discussions

#### Frequent Use of English and Malay Profanity

This is separated into two group of swear words which are English swear words and Malay swear words.

According to the findings, FPI subjects swear very little in English and the swear words that is frequently used by FPI subjects would be the word ‘Damn’. This shows that the English swear words may have bad content (Jdetawy, 2019) making it uncomfortable for them to use it. Even so, there are a lot of English swear words that FPI subject rarely use and never use. While for ELS subjects, they use English swear words daily since their medium of communication is English and they have the highest percentage on the variable of ‘Always’ use English swear words which can be proven through the research findings. This is since they study English and using English language is normal (Azman et al., 2019) to ELS hence why the percentage of using English swear words are higher.

Whereas, the frequent use of Malay swear words is more than English swear words use by FPI subjects. It is also common for FPI subjects to use Malay swear words like *Bongok* or *Bodoh* since it has the lowest level of profanity. Moreover, ELS subject also frequently use Malay



swear words since the highest percentage is used for the common word *Bodoh* as seen in Table 4. This exhibits that people around Malaysia commonly use that word to express something or to joke around as Azman et al. (2019) states that swearing in Malay word is common and it is a way of conversing their feelings towards something.

This shows that people often use profanity as something humorous (Stephens and Robertson, 2020) because small group of people swear for intriguing ways to add colour in their language is true since both FPI and ELS students use swear words when communicating.

### **Reasons for the Use of Profanity**

When communicating with an individual, there must be a reason on why they want to communicate. Either to say something important or whether to just make a conversation in order to create a friendly environment. In terms of using profanity in daily communication, there must be a specific reason on why people use profanity; is it to add colour to their conversation? Since whenever a speaker use a certain language in their conversation, it shows characteristics about themselves (DeFrank and Kahlbaugh, 2019). Thus, through the research findings, the answers have been revealed.

Subject from the Faculty of Islamic Studies swear because they are unaware of the words coming from their mouth as when they are angry, they just blurt out profane words. This is different compared to subjects from English Language Studies where they swear because it shows their emotions and by swearing, they can express their feelings better.

As seen in the Table 5 frustration is the main cause of why FPI subjects use swear words, while for ELS subjects, they stated that the main reason why they swear is because of anger. This shows that angry emotions play a big role in releasing profanity words. For university students, using profanity as a way of expressing anger will help them facilitate their stress (Jdetawy, 2019). Also, through Table 5, it is quite surprising that FPI subjects even stated the cause of their swearing would be because of sexual reference. This means that they are not actually cautious of their words even though they are from The Faculty of Islamic Studies.

## **5. Conclusion**

This research has provided awareness regarding the use of profanity among students from The Faculty of Islamic Studies and English Language Studies. Therefore, lecturers should be aware that the use of profanity is actually common among Malaysia university students and people should understand that it does not create a negative influence. But in public, a person should take care of their language to ensure that it would not be offensive to hearers since public do not understand the person's intention and it might offend the hearer. Besides, this study has also explored on the types of profanity used by FPI and ELS students.

Despite living in the Malaysian culture and growing in a Malaysian family, ELS student still prefer to use English swear words even though their surroundings use Malay swear words. This study shows that it is true ELS students are influenced by the western culture since they are more likely to watch English movies rather than Malay movies. While for FPI students, despite they are belief to be religious and well preserved, they still swear in Malay language and they are well aware of the use of it. But, humans are not perfect, they make mistake and they repent.

Hence, profanity is not seen as a negative influence in the university level since it is quite common for Malaysia university students to use profanity both in Malay and English language as a many young people show their level of maturity through profanity.

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