A Systematic Literature Review of the Most Frequent Swear words used by English Language Learners

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Abstract
Swear words also known as profanity, often seen as inappropriate language that play roles in interactions by conveying intense feelings strengthening social connections and making speech more impactful. Using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) methodology, the review synthesizes findings from 25 research articles published between 2009 and 2024 where it examines the most frequent swear words used among English language learners, focusing on the various forms, functions, and contexts in which these words are employed. The studies, drawn from databases such as Scopus, ERIC, and Web of Science (WoS), explore the usage of swear words in different cultural and social contexts, with a particular emphasis on English language learners. The common profane words found are "fuck," "shit," "damn," and "suck," often used in situations such as classrooms, online interactions, social gatherings and media platforms. This analysis showcases the ways in which language learners incorporate these words into their vocabulary. It offers insights for teachers and researchers to comprehend the role of profanity in language acquisition and social interactions. Additionally, the analysis discusses the constraints of research and offers suggestions for further exploration by researchers in this area.
Keywords: Swear Words, Profanity, English Language Learners, Frequent, Context

Introduction
Swearing or profane words, a type of language often seen as inappropriate or offensive has piqued the interest of experts, in fields like linguistics, psychology and education. Despite its connotations, swear words play roles in communication by conveying intense emotions fostering social connections and offering stress relief. For individuals that learning English as a language, the use of words presents unique obstacles and insights into language acquisition, social integration and cultural adjustment.

It is essential to grasp the significance of words among language learners for several reasons. Firstly, swear words are a part of language expression and evolution shaped by social and psychological influences. Studying on how learners pick up and employ swear words can shed light on their adaptation to social settings and understanding swearing habits can assist educators and policymakers in developing language programs that focus on both linguistic skills and socio-cultural awareness.

The use of swear words varies widely across cultures and social settings. Certain cultures may find curse words socially acceptable or imbued with different meanings than others. For language learners from cultures with varying attitudes, toward swearing practices navigating these differences can prove challenging. Furthermore, the advent of communication platforms has added complexity to the realm of swearing exposing learners to a range of linguistic influences and online social norms. Swear words, also known as profanities, expletives or curse words are commonly employed in communication. These terms are often deemed inappropriate or offensive in contexts. Continue to be utilized across various cultures and social settings due to their strong emotional impact and ability to convey messages effectively. Swear words serve purposes, such as expressing emotions like anger, frustration or surprise and strengthening bonds and group identity.

This comprehensive literature review aims to identify and analyze the used swear words by English language learners with a specific focus on English language leaners. By consolidating insights from the studies, this review seeks to explore the forms, functions and acquisition of words among learners as well as the semantic changes that occur in their usage. The overarching objective is to offer educators, researchers and policymakers' valuable perspectives that can enhance language teaching practices and promote the integration of learners.

Research Objectives
The objectives of this research were:
1) To identify the most frequents swear words that used among English language learners.
2) To analyze the contexts in which these swear words are being used by English language learners

Research Questions
The research questions of this study were:
1) What are the most frequent swear words used by English language learners?
2) In what contexts that the English language learners used swear words?

Background of the Study
This section provided a comprehensive review of the definition of swear words also known as profanity by drawing insights from a range of previous studies. It is crucial to explain the conceptual definition of swear words and identify different context where swear words usually used. By synthesizing the perspectives from previous studies, it will clarify the concept or the use of swear words itself. This section aimed to provide a thorough understanding of the concept,

the context or situations where swear words are used and the most frequent swear words used by English language learners.

Definition of Swear words

Swear words are defined linguistically as words or phrases that are socially frowned upon and seen as inappropriate or offensive in contexts. As per Jay (2009) swearing involves "the use of charged language of neutral language." This definition explains why swear words are utilized—they convey emotions powerfully compared to language. Swear words often go against norms and can be classified based on themes, like sexual content, bodily functions, religious disrespect and derogatory terms. According to Debray (2023), Swearing is when people use words that could be seen as offensive, inappropriate or unacceptable depending on the setting. This definition makes it a topic that sparks debate. Although swearing can offend others, it can also help bring people and create a sense of unity. In addition, according to Vingerhoets, Bylsma, and Vlam (2013), swearing involves using language that references something or socially stigmatized in the speaker's culture. It is not meant to be taken yet it is used to convey strong emotions or attitudes. The combination of these elements gives swearing a heightened impact making it more effective, in situations.

Frequency of Usage

The frequency of swear word usage varies significantly based on the environment, background, the individual's character and the situation. Studies show that swear words make up a notable part of everyday language use. For example, research indicates that 0.5% to 0.7% of adult conversations involve the use of words (Jay & Janschewitz,2008). This frequency tends to rise in situations, like moments of heightened emotions, circumstances or within social circles where swearing is commonplace. When it comes to individuals learning English, the frequency of using words can be influenced by factors such as language skills, cultural background and exposure to native speakers. Learners often come across words through media exposure interactions with peers and online platforms leading to differing levels of familiarity and usage.

Various Situations for Swearing

Swear words are utilized in situations for purposes in communication. Some common scenarios include.

- **Expressing Emotions**: Swear words are commonly used to convey emotions like anger, frustration, pain or surprise. For instance, someone might swear when they accidentally hit their thumb with a hammer out of pain and frustration (Pinker, 2010)
- **Building Social Connections**: In environments swearing can act to build connections, among individuals by fostering camaraderie and solidarity within groups. For example, friends sometimes playfully use words to strengthen their bond
 (Jumanto & Sulistyorini, 2019)
- **In Comedy and Entertainment**: Swear words are often integrated into routines to provoke laughter and engage audiences. Comedians frequently incorporate swearing to amplify their jokes and establish a connection with their viewers (Jay, 2019)
- **Educational Environments**: Among students swear words might be used to express frustration over hurdles or foster camaraderie among peers. Nevertheless, the

appropriateness of using language in settings is subject to scrutiny and typically regulated by institutional guidelines (Generous & Houser, 2019)

- **Online Platforms**: The anonymity and informal atmosphere of platforms often facilitate a surge in the use of words. Social media channels, forums and comment sections are spaces where individuals freely express their emotions through profanity (Amin & Sharipudin, 2019)

Significance for English Language Learners

Mastering the usage of words poses a challenge, for English language learners as it involves navigating complex linguistic nuances appropriately. Swear words play a role in English but their usage varies based on context and cultural nuances. It is important for learners to understand the balance, between communication and social appropriateness prompting educators to address this language aspect in their teaching. This literature review systematically examines the used swear words by English language learners and the situations in which they are utilized. By consolidating research findings, this review aims to provide a comprehension of how and why English language learners incorporate swear words into their language offering valuable insights, for both educators and researchers.

Methodology

This systematic literature review was conducted following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines. Following the 27-item checklist and a four-phase flow diagram where article were analysed and evaluated to answer two research questions.. The four phases of the PRISMA were including identification phase, screening phase, eligibility phase, and inclusion phase.

Phase 1: Identification Phase

In this phase, a comprehensive search strategy was employed to identify relevant studies. The following predefined criteria were considered:

- **Databases**: The search was conducted across multiple databases, including SCOPUS, ERIC, and Web of Science (WoS).
- **Publication Year**: Studies published between 2009 and 2024 were considered to ensure the review included recent and relevant research.
- **Language**: Only articles published in English were included to maintain consistency and comprehensibility.
- **Document Type**: Only peer-reviewed research articles and conference papers were included to ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings.
- **Access to Full Text**: Articles with open access or full-text availability were included to allow thorough review and analysis.

The search strings used across all databases included combinations of the following keywords: "swear words," "profanity," "English language learners," "classroom," "frequency," and "context used."

Table 1
Table Shows the Inclusion And Exclusion Criteria in Choosing the Articles

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Database	Scopus, ERIC, WOS	Other databases
Publication Year	2009-2024	Articles before 2008
Language	English	Articles in other languages than English
Document Type	Research articles, conference papers	Books, book chapters, review papers
Access to Full Text	Open access, full-text available	Limited or no access

Apart from the five predefined criteria, the articles were determined by using several search strings and keywords. Each search string was used in all three databases to find relevant articles related to the most frequent swear words that used by English Language Learners.

Table 2
Table Shows the Search Strings Used in All Three Databases to Identify the Articles

Search strings				
English	AND	(swear words)		
Swear Words	AND	(Profanity)	AND	English
Frequency	AND	(swear words)	AND	English
Profanity	AND	(classroom)	AND	English

Based on the criteria and the search strings in Table 1 and 2, all articles identified that fit the inclusion and exclusion criteria were chosen and listed, while others were removed and discarded from the list.

Phase 2: Screening Phase
In the screening phase, the titles and abstracts of the identified articles were reviewed to ensure they matched the inclusion criteria. The following steps were taken:
1. **Title Screening**: Articles with titles that clearly did not match the research topic were excluded.
2. **Abstract Screening**: Abstracts of the remaining articles were read to further assess their relevance to the study. Articles that did not meet the predefined criteria were excluded at this stage.
3. **Duplicate Removal**: Duplicate articles were identified and removed to avoid redundancy.

Phase 3: Eligibility Phase
During the eligibility phase, the full texts of the remaining articles were thoroughly reviewed to confirm their relevance and adherence to the inclusion criteria. The following steps were taken:
1. **Full-Text Review**: Full texts were assessed to ensure they addressed the research questions related to the most frequent swear words used by English language learners.

2. **Data Extraction**: Key information was extracted from each eligible article, including study design, participants, methodology, findings, and conclusions.

Phase 4: Exclusion Phase

In the final phase, articles that did not meet the eligibility criteria were excluded from the review. This phase ensured that only the most relevant and high-quality studies were included in the final synthesis. The process of identifying articles were portrayed in a flowchart as shown in Figure 1. The following exclusion criteria were applied:

1. **Irrelevant Focus**: Articles that did not specifically focus on the use of swear words among English language learners were excluded.
2. **Insufficient Data**: Studies that did not provide sufficient data or methodological detail to address the research questions were excluded.
3. **Publication Bias**: Articles that appeared to have publication bias or lacked rigorous peer review were excluded.
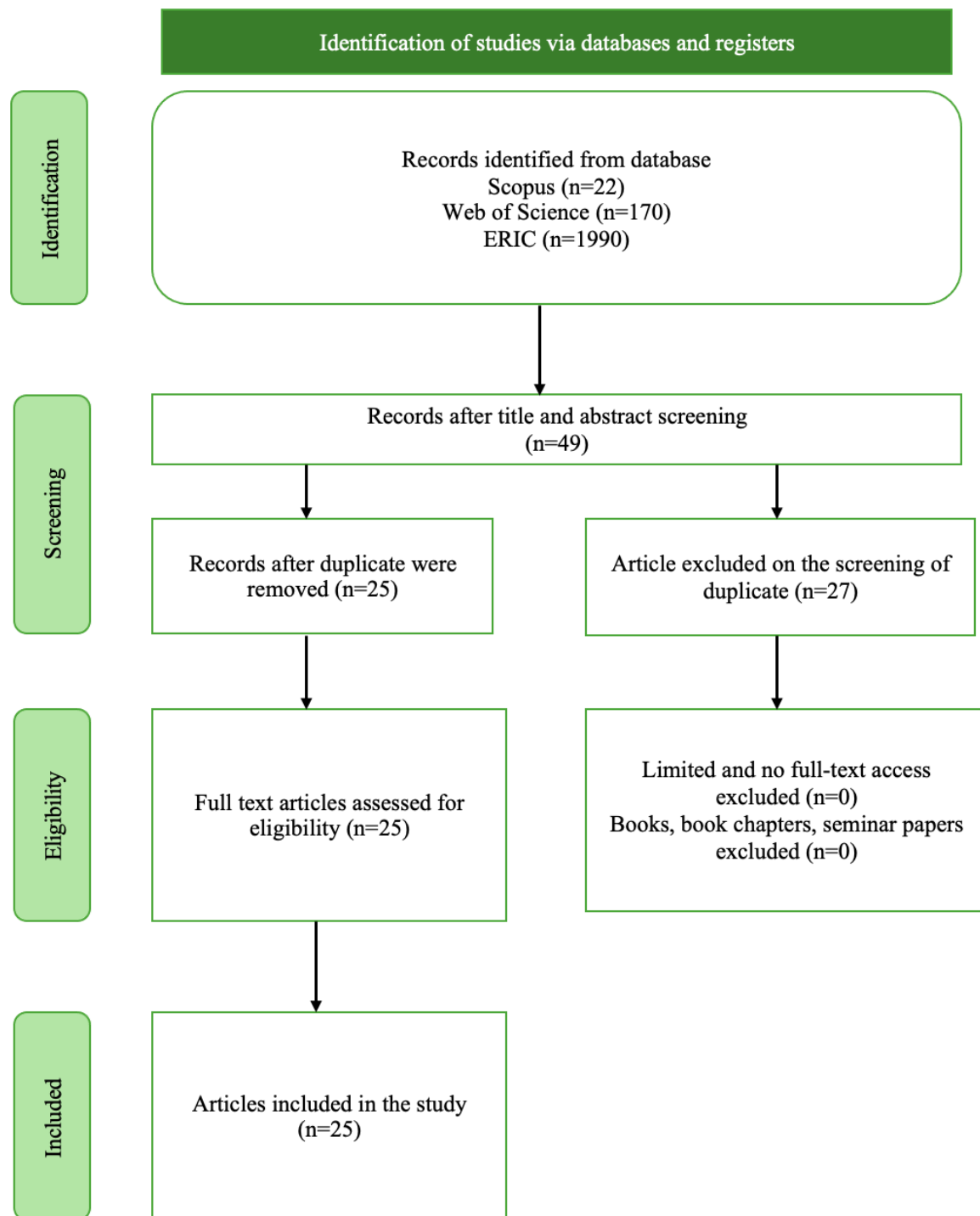
Figure 1: Figure shows the flowchart of the article screening and selection process.

The final number of articles selected after the four-phase screening process was 25. These articles consisted of research papers that employed 13 different research methodology which are

qualitative (4), quantitative (5) , mixed methodology (3), ethnographic (1), content analysis (1), corpus analysis (1), corpus pragmatic (1), review (3), empirical study (2), theoretical study (1), multimodal discourse analysis (1), literature review (1), and experimental (1). Quantitative and qualitative are dominant research methodology followed by other types that used in selected articles, as depicted in Table 3.

Table 3
Table Shows the Number of Articles Based on the Research Methodology Employed

Research methodology	Quantity
Qualitative	4
Quantitative	5
Mixed method	3
	1
	1
	1
	1
Ethnographic	3
Content Analysis	2
Corpus Analysis	1
Corpus Pragmatic	1
Review	1
Empirical Study	1
Theoretical Analysis	
Multimodal Discourse Analysis	
Literature Review	
Experimental	

Findings and Discussions
A total of 25 articles have been collected, analyzed, and tabulated for the researchers' investigation. Notably, all articles were sourced from the period between 2009 to 2024. This selection strategy was intended to validate the relevance of the current study by aligning it with recent issues and trends. Additionally, it serves as a guide for the researcher in addressing the proposed research questions effectively.

No.	Title and author(s)	Country	Research Method	Research Participants	Frequency of Swear Words Used	Context of Usage
1	Fuck: The Police (Ian T. Adams, 2024)	USA	Mixed Methods	Police officers	*F**k*	Policing and law enforcement
2	Responsibilisation and Verbal Behaviour (Lynn Downes, Margaret Kettle, Peter C. O'Brien, Gordon Tait, 2021)	Australia	Qualitative	19 teachers and school leaders	*S**t*	School settings and student swearing
3	Swearing in Class: Institutional Morality (Catherine Doherty, Adon Berwick, Rowena McGregor,2018)	Australia	Ethnographic	Teachers and students	*F**k, S**t*	Classroom management and moral order
4	The Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television (Jean M. Twenge, W. Keith Campbell, Hannah VanLandingham,2017)	USA	Content Analysis	N/A	*F**k, S**t, Da***	Cultural shifts in American books
5	How Different Genders Use Profanity on Twitter (Phoey Lee Teh, Chi-Bin Cheng, 2020)	Taiwan	Quantitative	Twitter users	*F**k, S**t*	Social media interactions
6	Swearing, Identity and Power in Professional Interaction (Carolin Debray, 2023)	Switzerland	Qualitative	Multilingual team members	*F**k*	Professional communication and teamwork
7	Swearing, Discourse and Function in British English (Tony McEnery, Gavin Brookes, Elizabeth Hanks, Kevin Gerigk, Jesse Egbert, 2023)	UK, USA	Corpus Analysis	General British speakers	*F**k*	Casual conversations
8	Swearing and Pragmatic Functions in Teenage British English (Robbie Love, Anna-Brita Stenstrom, 2023)	UK, Norway	Corpus Pragmatic	British teenagers	*F**k*	Teenage casual conversation

9	Swearing and Moral Order Online (Timothy Jay, 2018)	USA	Review	Online users	*F**k, S**t*	Online communication and social order
10	Swearing and Social Dynamics (E. Holgate, I. Cachola, D. Preotiuc-Pietro, J. J. Li, 2018)	USA	Empirical Study	Twitter users	*F**k, S**t*	Online social interactions
11	Gender Differences in Swearing on Facebook (M. Muhanović, N. Babić, E. Latic, 2018)	Bosnia	Quantitative Study	Facebook users	*F**k, S**t*	Social media interactions
12	Swearing and Emotional Expression (Timothy Jay, 2009)	USA	Theoretical Analysis	General population	*F**k, S**t, B***h*	Emotional and psychological expression
13	Swearing in Online Campaigns (K. H. Kwon, A. Gruzd, 2017)	USA	Quantitative Study	YouTube users	*F**k, S**t*	Political campaign videos
14	Swearing and Digital Communication (W. Wang, et al., 2014)	USA	Quantitative Study	Twitter users	*F**k, S**t, D**n*	Tweets
15	Swearing and social media Dynamics (E. Holgate, et al., 2018)	USA	Empirical Study	Social media users	*F**k, S**t*	Social media interactions
16	Swearing and Humor (Timothy Jay, 2009)	USA	Review	General population	*F**k, S**t, D**n*	Humor and entertainment
17	Oh S***! Did I just swear in class? Mark A. Generous, Marian L. Houser, 2019)	USA	Quantitative Study	College students	*S**t*	Classroom interactions and teaching
18	How profanity influences perceived authenticity and perceived helpfulness of online reviews (David Sugianto Lie, Billy Sung, Michelle Stankovic, Felix Septianto, 2024)	Australia	Mixed Methods	Amazon and online reviewers	*D**n, S**t*	Perceived authenticity and helpfulness

19	Hashtag swearing: Pragmatic polysemy and polyfunctionality of #FuckPutin as solidary flaming (Marta Dynel, 2023)	Poland, Lithuania	Multimodal Discourse Analysis	Twitter users	*F**k, S**t*	Solidarity and aggression in political context
20	Swearing: A Biopsychosocial Perspective (Ad J.J.M. Vingerhoets, Lauren M. Bylsma, Cornelis de Vlam, 2013)	Netherlands, USA	Review	General population	*F**k, S**t*	Emotional expression and interpersonal functions
21	English Profanity on Social Media: Linguistic Preferences and Reasons for Use (Noraziah Mohd Amin, Mohamad-Noor Salehhuddin Sharipudin, 2019)	Malaysia	Mixed Methods	Social media users	*F**k, S**t, D**n*	Social media interactions and communication
22	Swear Words and Their Implications for English Language Learning-Teaching (Kristina Andang, Barli Bram, 2018)	Indonesia	Qualitative Study	Language learners and teachers	*F**k, S**t, B***h, D**n*	Classroom interactions, cultural and linguistic sensitivity in language teaching
23	The Pragmatics of Swearing: How It Contextually Counts (Jumanto & Sulistyorini, 2019)	Indonesia	Literature Review	General population	*F**k, D**n, S**t*	Informal settings, expressions of solidarity or anger

24	The Use of Swear Words Among Class Students	Indonesia	Qualitative, Case Study	6 English literature students	*F**k, S**t, D**n*	Expressing frustration and anger in educational settings
	(Farihan, Djauhari, & Saehu, 2024)					
25	Students' perception of an instructor: The effects of instructor accommodation to student swearing	USA	Experimental	396 university students	*S**k, D**n*	Classroom settings, instructor-student interactions
	(Generous & Houser, 2019)					

Table 4 summarized the type of research methodology used by each article and the participants involved in each study, and the platforms used in each of the research articles and the discussed impacts of the platforms used.

In the 25 articles, there were different themes found in identifying the frequent swear words used by English language learners. These themes form the primary areas of focus on the context of usage the use of swear words itself. The identified themes, including emotional expression, social interaction and identity, cognitive and linguistic processing, cultural and sociolinguistic contexts were identified, and the frequency of each theme being discussed in each article was recorded.

Frequency of studies according to themes

- Emotional Expression — 24%
- Social Interaction and Identity — 32%
- Cognitive and Linguistic Processing — 20%
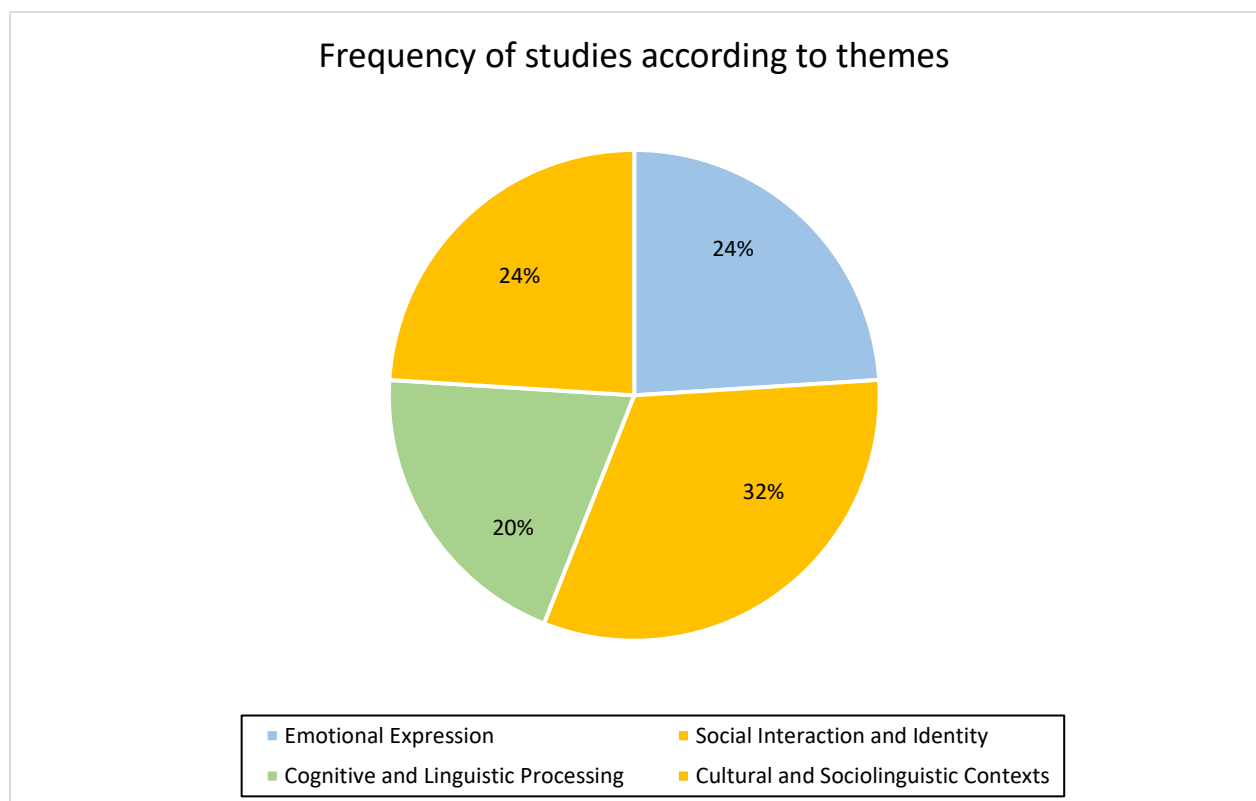- Cultural and Sociolinguistic Contexts — 24%

Figure 2 : Figure shows the frequency of studies discussing the frequency of swear words used by English language learners.

Table 5

Table Shows The Most Frequent Swear Words Used By English Language Learners Synthesised From 25 Articles. The Impacts Were Categorised Into Four Themes

No	Author(s)	Emotional Expression	Social Interaction and Identity	Cognitive and Linguistic Processing	Cultural and Sociolinguistic Contexts
1	Adams (2024)	/	/		
2	Amin & Sharipudin (2019)				/
3	Andang & Bram (2018)				/
4	Debray (2023)		/		
5	Doherty, Berwick & McGregor (2018)		/		
6	Downes et al. (2021)		/		
7	Dynel (2023)				/
8	Farihan, Djauhari, & Saehu, (2024)	/			
9	Generous & Houser (2019)	/			
10	Generous & Houser (2019)	/	/		
11	Holgate et al. (2018)		/		
12	Holgate et al. (2018)				/
13	Jay (2009)	/			
14	Jay (2009)	/			
15	Jay (2018)		/		
16	Jumanto, & Sulistyorini (2019)			/	/
17	Kwon & Gruzd (2017)				/
18	Lie et al. (2024)				/
19	Love & Stenstrom, (2023)		/		
20	McEnery et al (2023)		/		
21	Muhanović, Babić & Latic (2018)		/		
22	Teh, & Cheng (2020)		/		
23	Twenge, Campbell & VanLandingham, (2017)				/
24	Vingerhoets, Bylsma & Vlam (2013)	/			
25	Wang et al. (2014)		/		

As can be seen in Figure 2 and Table 5, there were different frequencies of studies according to the frequency of swear words used by English language learners and it has been thoroughly explored in fields resulting in the development of that four primary theories themes have

which are the emotional expression, social interaction and identity, cognitive and linguistic processing and cultural and sociolinguistic contexts. The findings shows that social interaction and identity was the most frequently discussed the frequent of swear words used with a percentage of 32%. The theory that can explain this theme is the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) where it delves into how people adjust their way of speaking including the use of language to either connect with or create distance from those they are talking to. Generous and Houser (2019) discovered that students view instructors who adapt their language even using words, as relatable and like themselves. This theory shines a light on how swearing plays a role in forging connections and shaping group identity.

Next, the theme of emotional expression and cultural and sociolinguistic contexts have a similar percentage (24%). One significant theory that sheds light on the use of words is the Emotional Release Theory. This theory suggests that swearing functions to release built up emotions and relieve stress. According to Vingerhoets et al. (2000) swearing can offer relief where it is assist individuals, in dealing with pain, frustration or anger. Studies have shown that swearing can activate the bodys fight or flight response leading to pain relief and stress reduction. Besides that, according to Andang and Bram (2019), the concept of Cultural Relativism highlights that the meanings and appropriateness of words vary across cultures. Different societies have norms and taboos related to swearing which influence how and when such language is used. They are also point out the importance of sensitivity when studying the use of words among English learners as their cultural backgrounds shape their perceptions and usage. In Sociolinguistic Variation Theory, it explores how factors like age, gender, socioeconomic status and social connections impact language use, including swearing. In a study by Muhanović, Babić and Latic (2018) gender differences, in swearing on Facebook were examined, revealing those social media interactions mirror trends.

Finally, the theme of cognitive and linguistic processing theme that shows as the lowest percentage (20%) where according to Relevance Theory brought forward by Sperber and Wilson (1986) proposes that effective communication aims at maximizing relevance by balancing the effort needed with the payoff. Swear words, due to their charge able to convey feelings and attitudes with little mental strain involved making them particularly pertinent, in certain contexts. This theory sheds light on why swear words employed to underscore arguments or express intense emotions concisely. In addition, According to Sweller (1988) that explains about Cognitive Load Theory, stated that using words may help reduce load by enabling individuals to express complex emotions quickly and effectively. This is especially relevant, in situations where mental resources limited. Research by Peterson (2000) indicates that university students tend to use words when feeling frustrated or stressed suggesting that swearing can aid in managing load.

Additionally, the theories provide a comprehension of the reasons and methods swear words are utilized. By examining these theories from perspectives like expression, social interaction and identity, cognitive and linguistic processing well, as cultural and sociolinguistic contexts, we gain valuable insights into how swear words are used by individuals learning English. This theoretical framework does not only enrich our understanding but also guides educational approaches and future research paths.

Conclusion
As to conclude, it was discovered that English language learners often incorporate words such as "fuck," "shit," "damn," "suck," and "bitch" into their vocabulary. These strong language

choices are utilized in a range of contexts, including settings, online interactions, social engagements and media platforms. The utilization of terms fulfils intentions like venting frustration expressing anger, building rapport maintaining authenticity in communication and highlighting important aspects in discussions. Studying the patterns of swear word usage among English language learners offers insights into the social and psychological influences also on language use. The studies reviewed reveal that swear words serve diverse functions, including emotional expression, social bonding, emphasis, and humor. They are used in various contexts such as educational settings, where they can both challenge and reinforce institutional norms, and online platforms where they contribute to dynamic social interactions. Despite these insights, the review also identified several limitations in the existing literature. The variability in research methods, cultural biases, and reliance on self-reported data suggest the need for more comprehensive and methodologically rigorous studies. Future research should aim to explore the use of swear words across different demographics, cultural backgrounds, and proficiency levels to develop a more nuanced understanding of this phenomenon.

Recommendations
As for future research, there are few recommendations and suggestions that need to be consider such as researcher may be focus on educational approaches as to give a knowledge to an educators on how to understand swear words that commonly used and their purposes in student communication. Teacher training programs should equip educators with strategies for handling and discussing the use of language in a culturally respectful manner. Besides that, further studies are necessary to examine how swear words are utilized among learners across age groups, proficiency levels and cultural backgrounds. This research will contribute to a comprehension of this phenomenon. Additionally, this study could further be refined by focusing on how language teachers should integrate conversations about the use of words into their teaching, exploring the cultural meanings behind such language. This can assist students in grasping when and where it is appropriate to use expressions enhancing their language skills. By following these suggestions, teachers and scholars can gain an insight into how swear words utilized by English language learners. This enhanced comprehension can lead to language acquisition and social engagement. Such a thorough grasp will aid in the development of teaching methods and a deeper understanding of the nuances of language usage across various settings.

Limitations
Although researcher succeed to answered both research questions, there are several limitations were found in this study. One of the limitations is the scope of study where the analysis focuses on articles published from 2009 to 2024. This time frame limitation might result in excluding studies published beyond this period potentially affecting the thoroughness of the analysis. Besides that, language proficiency levels where the review did not consider the proficiency levels of the learners, which could affect how frequently and in what context swear words are used. Further research is necessary to explore how proficiency level influences profanity use. Then, there is a limitation in terms of finding a studies that conducted in Malaysia or any asean country as to adapt the use of swear words into the culture. Most of the studies were conducted in western countries such as United Kingdom and United States. By acknowledging these constraints and heeding the suggestions, it

offered future research endeavours and educational strategies can enhance their understanding and management of swear word usage among language learners.

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