

Stumbling into Slurs: The Most Uncomfortable Person was the Teacher

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In this reflection, the researcher gives an origin story for their reluctant research on learner awareness of derogatory homophobic and racial slurs and a brief overview of their methodology and conclusions. Teaching a content course using authentic literature can be full of surprises, and what was thought to be an enjoyable course on the Lord of the Rings turned out to be an opportunity to explore university students' prior knowledge of four words (gay, queer, chink, and faggot) used in the novels. The words as used by Tolkien were decidedly not derogatory slurs, yet in the current English usage can be. Therefore, it was decided that the instruction should address these meanings and attempt to convey their various contextual meanings. Survey results show that for a group of learners at a Japanese university, the instruction of hateful derogatory slurs was welcomed and viewed as a necessary part of language learning. It is hoped that instruction on uncomfortable, rude, and hateful language not be avoided, despite the potential for discomfort.

I had always loved reading *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1954), and the chance to teach it to my university students sounded like a career pinnacle. It was a full semester of satisfying my nerdy tendencies and helping English learners refine their paraphrasing and other linguistic skills. The course was developed with very high proficiency English learners in mind, at a university in the Tokyo area of Japan, and we were reading the authentic trilogy as well as *The Hobbit*. Since the course focused heavily on vocabulary, students were required to keep detailed vocabulary logs that were submitted and checked periodically. After the first couple of checks in the early half of the semester, it became quite clear that a few words could cause some confusion and potentially even some rapport damaging discomfort. As it happens, Tolkien uses what modern English users would call antiquated or old definitions of particular words. Naturally, students might have some difficulty deciding which particular definition is meant by the author, but these words in particular are used in many contexts as modern derogatory slurs toward people in a particular racial group or of non-heterosexual orientation. The words in question were queer, gay, chink, and faggot. Tolkien's usage of these words have the meanings of strange; happy; a small cut or chip; and bundle of firewood. Sadly, today they are easily recognizable as words that refer, often derogatorily, to homosexual individuals, or in the case of chink, a racial slur against Chinese immigrants in the US (but which can be used against others of East Asian ethnicity).

How should I approach these vocabulary items? What if students looked these words up in their dictionaries and learned their derogatory and offensive meanings? Why did this have to happen? I just wanted to read and teach about something I enjoyed. I cursed my fate yet saw that there was a research project staring me right in the face. I couldn't in good faith ignore this potential source of

confusion, and thus decided to address what turned out to be a gap in the literature on taboo words. I could find research quite easily about what English language learners knew about taboo words related to excrement, interjections, and insults (Burduli, 2014; Dewaele, 2016). However, knowing slurs – what they mean, who might use them, and how to react – is extremely important in, for example, a study abroad situation. If a student in a foreign country were to hear a slur or even be a target of one, that student's knowledge would likely help them judge the safety of the situation, or at the least, whether the speaker of said slur is a person worth investing more time in.

The teaching of slurs in an English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom could very well be considered as opening Pandora's Box, with the question rightly being asked if this gives license to learners to start using slurs. Slurs cause an immediate reaction when heard, and especially among native speakers, the reaction is almost instantaneous and physical: hearing slurs causes emotional discomfort that manifests in a physical feeling of shock or discomfort. However, for nonnative speakers, slurs may not cause reactions with the same timeliness or physicality (Eilola & Havelka, 2011). Therefore, teaching these words is most likely more uncomfortable for the native speaker teacher than anyone else. It was my idea that having a lesson on these words would be difficult for me, but if my students wanted to learn these words, and saw their impact on a native speaker firsthand, that it would be worth my sacrifice at least. The research inquiry was then set, with two main questions:

1. What is a beginning reference point regarding my students' knowledge of these derogatory slurs?
2. How do they feel about learning such derogatory words in a classroom setting?

Methodology

Participants and Context

In order to address various concerns, for various reasons, not the least of which being the ethical approval process, I decided to have one 90-minute lesson on the four above-named words, sandwiched by two short surveys. Approval to carry out this research and collect data from students was applied for and received from the review committee in the department. Twenty-one students, all native speakers of Japanese and in their third or fourth year of undergraduate study, agreed to allow their survey answers to be used in this research, and both surveys were anonymous and separate.

Instructional Treatment

Following an inductive learning model, I created a worksheet (see Appendix A) which consisted of fill-in-the-

blank items. The items were quotes from the Lord of the Rings and the COCA corpus, with the corpus items representing the derogatory slur usage. Participants were given time to put the four words into each item (2 items for each word). After this task was complete, the participants had to decide if the words were used in a derogatory manner or not. Finally, the last task was to rank the words in order from least offensive (queer, gay) to most offensive (chink, faggot). This ranking was determined partly by examining the degree of reclamation done by the community targeted by the slur, and partly by examining the degree to which people not in the community can use the slur in a non-derogatory way. It was determined that these two words were less offensive, as evidenced by the existence of queer theory in academia, and the mainstream use of queer and gay as descriptive adjectives with neutral or positive connotations. The final wrap-up task was a short explanation that these words have a long and painful history, with many being yelled contemptuously before violent action. Students were clearly able to see my discomfort when discussing this, yet I also tried to show that context, speaker, and intended use matters.

The significance of intent can be most easily observed when examining the word queer; both in Tolkien and modern usage, the word has been subject to several reclamations. Queer is used perhaps most frequently used of the four by Tolkien. In the Lord of the Rings, this word is used to denote 'strange and/or wrong' people or behavior. Today, it is synonymous with a variety of sexual orientations outside of the typical heterosexuality. It is quite notable that this word has been for the most part reclaimed by the non-heterosexual community, even becoming a named academic discipline in queer theory. This reclamation was echoed by Tolkien as well. In book I, chapter 1 of the Fellowship of the Ring, when the topic of Bilbo Baggins was discussed, he was called queer (strange and wrong). However, the Gaffer, Bilbo's gardener, reclaimed the word by equating it with Bilbo's generosity (he had invited the entire Shire to his birthday party): "If that's being queer, then we could do with a bit more queerness in these parts. There's some not far away that wouldn't offer a pint of beer to a friend, if they lived in a hole with golden walls" (Tolkien, 1954, p.31). This same reclamation phenomenon has also occurred with the word gay.

While the instructional treatment primarily dealt with the contrast of archaic yet innocuous and modern yet derogatory, it should be noted that context still allows for a variety of interpretations of these words. Most notably is perhaps the use of the word faggot. In the US context, the word has decidedly only an extremely strong derogatory use, yet in the UK context, the word can mean bundle of sticks or a kind of meatball, as well as the derogatory use. Similarly, the word chink occurred in the COCA corpus either as a slur or in the set phrase chink in the armor, with no other uses detected. While this set phrase may be acceptable in some contexts, particularly in the UK, it should be noted that there is some effort to retire the phrase (Hsu, 2012). Indeed, the phrase weak spot carries no such baggage and does not refer to any figurative

armor, which shows that at least in the American context, the phrase chink in the armor is outdated.

Data Collection

The first survey (see Appendix B) was administered on the same day as the instructional treatment, just before it. It was 4-12 questions, and surveyed the knowledge or awareness of each of the four words. For each word affirmatively marked for previous exposure or knowledge, participants were then asked if they knew the older, non-offensive Tolkien meaning as well as the new derogatory meaning. If participants indicated that they did not have any previous exposure or knowledge, they were not asked about either meaning. Time to complete the survey took less than 15 minutes.

Following the first survey, the instructional treatment was given, and the final survey (see Appendix C) contained two yes/no questions and two open-ended questions. Participants were asked if they felt discomfort when learning these words in a classroom environment, whether incidentally or as part of a pre-planned lesson. Participants were then invited to give open-ended answers in English or Japanese to explain their opinions about instruction on derogatory slurs. Many opted to answer in English, but Japanese answers were translated by the author. This survey also took less than 15 minutes.

Questions on both surveys were given in English and Japanese. Results of the surveys will be presented in the following section.

Results

Survey

The first survey would give a picture of the participants' prior knowledge of the words under research. As can be seen in Table 1, the most widely understood term is the word gay, with the least known word being chink. One participant did not indicate an answer for the word queer. This shows that EFL contexts do give the chance for learners to be exposed to these items, and presumably other derogatory terms. The participants reporting prior exposure only, and thus no semantic knowledge, suggest that lack of contextual understanding or cultural knowledge inhibited semantic uptake. Learners are being exposed to these words to varying degrees, but their learning needs seem not to be addressed in most curricula, as will be further discussed.

Survey 2

Participants overwhelmingly reported little discomfort, with 18 reporting no discomfort learning about slurs, and 20 reporting no discomfort when they are deliberately addressed pedagogically. One participant reported discomfort with both the words and a lesson on the words, and two participants reported discomfort in the words but not in a lesson.

Open ended responses were moderately variable, but on the whole the participants felt that learning these words is necessary and important for learning the

Word	Understood old meaning	Understood new meaning	understood both meanings	prior exposure only	No Prior exposure or not sure
Queer	1	1	2	4	12
Gay	3	5	4	2	7
faggot	2	3	0	4	12
chink	0	1	0	2	18

language of English and also about the cultures of the people who speak it. Learners expressed a desire not to inadvertently cause anxiety to others by not understanding the full scope of a word such as a slur (even if it has been reclaimed by the community), and also noted the lack of textbooks and explicit instruction as a detriment. One participant also mentioned that they did not like the idea of a slur being used towards them and not realizing it. Finally, it must also be noted that a couple of participants were thankful for explicit instruction on these words, even if they felt discomfort during the lesson for themselves or out of concern for other classmates.

Discussion

The teaching of these words turned out to not be a Pandora's Box after all. In my class of 21 Japanese participants, one knew the derogatory meaning of a slur directed toward people of East Asian ethnicity. While not verified for statistical significance, any instructor should be able to operate on the assumption that someone in the classroom knows at least one of these kinds of words, and this finding has helped me to conduct my lessons with an increased level of awareness of the broad knowledge and experiences students bring into the classroom. Therefore, I believe that we as teachers do students a disservice when not providing a full repertoire of social and linguistic responses. By not addressing impoliteness, including the use of slurs, and only teaching students to be polite, we limit their ability to understand and respond to situations of rudeness or even danger. Particularly in a study abroad context, this leaves learners unprepared if being insulted, mocked, or even threatened (Valdeon, 2015).

This research has helped me gain a new perspective on language learning and thus inform my teaching practice. I can think of many of my own experiences of rudeness being directed toward me in an unfamiliar culture and language. On occasion in my daily life in Japan, I have wanted the ability to respond with some language that communicates, "I see that you are being rude/racist/xenophobic." Having this ability, would, to me, give me some sense of power over the situation, and to convey that I am choosing not to escalate the situation even though I could. Knowledge is power, and it is our duty to fully empower our learners. By not ignoring derogatory slurs and other rude language, we give a more complete picture of the complexities of English-speaking cultures.

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Appendix A

In-Class Worksheet

Chink Queer Faggot Gay

1. Please fill in the blanks in the sentences with any of the above words. You may use the words more than once.
 - a. "You can say what you like, Gaffer, but Bag End's a queer place, and its folk are queer er."
 - b. Last year, the owner of Chink 's Steaks in Philadelphia finally gave up his fight to keep his restaurant's name and lost 30 percent to 40 percent of his customer base. " They say,' You bent to the PC police,' " said Joe Groh, who renamed his restaurant Joe's Steak and Soda Shop. He bought the business from its original owner, Samuel Sherman, who'd been nicknamed " chink " as a kid because of his almond shaped eyes.
 - c. Growing up in high school, being singled out as somebody who's different is never easy, and it's quite a sad situation for a lot of kids across the world in today's society. And for me, when I was that age, I was called " faggot , " " homo , " " gay boy , " on a daily occurrence. And I was, in some ways lucky that I was never physically bullied, but more mentally bullied.
 - d. While literary criticism has tended to become more sexpositive since the rise of queer theory and third-wave feminisms in the 1990s, high postmodernist novels of the 1970s remain particularly fraught among contemporary feminist scholars, who often critique postmodern novelists' unapologetic

investment in virile masculinity and exclusionary discourses.

- e. Chink in the armor: Smaug had an empty spot in his gold and jewel armor
- f. Picking up a faggot he held it aloft for a moment, and then with a word of command, naur an edraith ammen! he thrust the end of his staff into the midst of it.
- g. Another word for happy is gay . The hobbits had a gay time before the adventure became so dangerous.

2. Please identify which instances above are pejorative (expressing disapproval)/highly offensive, and which ones are not.

- a. Yes, but uses the original pejorative, not the homophobic meaning
- b. Pejorative
- c. Pejorative
- d. Not pejorative
- e. Not pejorative
- f. Not pejorative
- g. Not pejorative

3. Rank the words from least to most offensive:

- a. least: queer, gay
- b. most: chink, faggot

4. Write the word or words which has/have been reclaimed by the community: queer, gay

5. Write the word or words that has/have been partially reclaimed by some on the community: chink, faggot

6. Write the word or words that has/have not been reclaimed: chink, faggot

Appendix B

Survey 1 Questions

For each of the four words: Had you ever seen or heard this word before taking this class? 今回の受講をする前に、あなたはこの言葉を見たこと、又は聞いたことがありましたか?

Yes, I had seen / heard this word before taking this class. はい、私はこの授業以前にこの言葉を見たこと、又は聞いた事がありました。

No, I had not. いいえ、私はこの言葉を見たことや聞いた事はありませんでした。

I am not sure

If yes:

Were you aware of its original meaning? あなたはこの言葉の持つ本来の意味を知っていましたか? Yes No

Were you aware of its newer meaning? あなたはこの言葉の持つ新しい意味を知っていましたか? Yes No

Appendix C

Survey 2 Questions

1. Do you see value in learning the offensive meanings of the words listed above in an English class? Please explain why. あなたは、上記の言葉の持つ不快な意味について学ぶことに価値があると思いますか? その理由も合わせてご説明ください。

2. Did learning the offensive meanings of words in an English class have any effect on your level of comfort in the class (Did learning these offensive meanings give you any anxiety or discomfort?) これらの言葉を英語授業で学んだことは、あなたの受講中の居心地レベルに影響がありましたか? (これらの不快な意味の言葉を学んだことで、あなたは不安感や不快感を感じましたか?)

Yes はい。 No いいえ。

Did having a lesson focused on offensive language make you uncomfortable in class? あなたは、不快な言葉を中心にした授業を受けたことで、授業中に居心地が悪いと感じる事がありましたか?

Yes はい。 No いいえ。

3. Would you prefer not to learn offensive words or offensive meanings of certain words in the classroom (either incidentally or as part of a lesson)? Please explain why. あなたは、不快な言葉や不快な意味を授業中に学ぶことは (それが付随的、又は授業の一部だとしても) 出来ればしたくないと思いますか? その理由も合わせてお答えください。

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