

From Screens to Speech: Guidance Counselors' Perceptions on How Social Media Deinfluencing Normalizes Cussing Among Grades 3–6 Learners

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Abstract. This study looks at how guidance counselors see social media deinfluencing as a factor in the normalization of swearing among students in Grades 3–6. Children are becoming exposed to influencer content that frequently uses vulgarity, humor, and expressive delivery in digitally mediated spaces. Deinfluencing may unintentionally reinforce profanity because of its performative and emotionally charged nature, even when its goal is to discourage behaviors. This study, which is based on Chomsky's Generative/Innatist Theory, presents cursing not as deliberate wrongdoing but as a linguistically acquired habit shaped by patterned exposure. Semi-structured interviews with guidance counselors and teacher-designates in the Milagros West District of Masbate Province were used to gather data using a qualitative descriptive design, which was then subjected to thematic analysis. Results show that learners are mimicking not just language but also tone and expressive styles from social media, making swearing spontaneous, socially rooted, and linguistically internalized. Profanity was found to be paradoxically strengthened by deinfluencing content through emotional salience and repetition. Cussing is a socially reinforced and digitally mediated linguistic phenomenon, according to the study's conclusion, underscoring the necessity of media-informed and language-sensitive interventions in educational contexts.

Introduction

The high growth of digital media has greatly transformed the language growth of children in the world. As the use of social media platforms and especially short-form video apps grow in popularity among young learners, they find themselves exposed to various types of language that are informal, full of emotion, and performative. International studies indicate that this exposure has an impact on vocabulary, tone, and communicative pattern of children and tends to make them acquire slang, sarcasm, and profanity by natural learning of languages instead of actively learning them. Linguistic theorists also highlight that expressions that are emotionally colored, like cuss words, are very salient and more apt to be imitated and remembered by a child because of its expressiveness.

This change in language is becoming prominent even in Asian situations whereby children have been adopting the language styles of the characters on the internet such as insults, swearing profanity, and even the use of curse words. With ongoing growth of digital platforms as the sources of linguistic input by children, including parents and teachers, influencer-created content has emerged as a highly influential paradigm of communication. Repeated exposure also supports these patterns and children internalize not only the vocabulary, but also the tone and pragmatic use of language in social interactions.

In southeast Asia, the same trends have been noted and the research indicates that the use of inappropriate language among the learners of upper-elementary has been on the increase. This has been brought about by the growing popularity of gaming livestreams, humorous content, and short-form videos. The most interesting one is the development of deinfluencing content that tends to deter specific behaviors, but frequently utilizes humor, sarcasm, and expressive

language to convey the content, such as profanity. Although this information is corrective, it might unwillingly promote the use of cuss words by repetition and emotional focus making the words more memorable and prone to reproduction by young viewers.

The effect of social media on the use of language by children in the Philippine context is particularly acute because of the high scores of internet access and smartphone ownership. Research shows that elementary students in the Philippines often follow the speaking style of online characters, using slang, some light profanity, and emotional language in their everyday speech. According to guidance offices in government schools, the number of referrals due to use of inappropriate language has been on the rise among learners in the Grades 3-6. Although the schools have implemented policies like the Child Protection Policy of the Department of Education, the schools still find it hard to deal with such cases since the problem is not just a behavioral issue, but a very deep-rooted problem that lies in the acquisition of language and media exposure.

This is also supported in the rural areas like Masbate Province where digital immersion among young learners has been on the rise. According to teachers and guidance counselor-designates, cussing is becoming an accepted behavior among elementary-aged learners, which may take place in informal conversations, play, and peer communication. Most learners attribute their language use to social media exposure, such as on Tik Tok and through the gaming content they consume, where expressive and performative speech is common. The problem is, though, that access to licensed guidance counselors in such areas is limited which complicates the intervention further, leaving more responsibilities to teacher-designates. The Milagros West District has witnessed an increasing case of inappropriate language among learners in Grades 3 to 6 wherein guidance counselors have noted that learners tend to use cuss words without conscious effort and malice. Such expressions are perceived as funny or acceptable within a social setting by many children as they are influenced by the communicative styles of the influencers they listen to. This prompts a crucial question: swearing amongst students can no longer be sufficiently viewed as a disciplinary problem but as a linguistic process that occurs due to the patterned exposure and natural process of learning a language.

Based on the Generative/Innatist Theory by Chomsky, who argues that children learn language via innate systems triggered by the external environment, this research aims to investigate the ways in which exposure to social media, and especially deinfluencing content, leads to internalization and normalization of cuss words among young learners. In particular, the research focuses on the beliefs of guidance counselors on the linguistic patterns, situational factors, and the difficulties related to the management of cussing behavior in Grades 3-6 students in the Milagros West District.

Methodology

In order to investigate how social media deinfluencing contributes to the normalizing of swearing among students in Grades 3-6, this study used a qualitative descriptive methodology. The study, which is based on Chomsky's Generative/Innatist Theory, views swearing as a behavior that is learned through repeated exposure to and internalization of linguistic patterns. The analysis of how students process and replicate profanity in their communicative context was informed by the theoretical framework.

Guidance counselors and certified teacher-counselors from public elementary schools in Masbate Province's Milagros West District made up the participants. To ensure relevance and depth of insight, purposive sampling was used to select only individuals who had dealt with at least one instance of cussing among students in Grades 3-6 during the current or prior academic year.

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data on participants' experiences, perceived media influences, observed linguistic patterns, and intervention challenges. Individual interviews were conducted, audio recorded with permission, and verbatim transcriptions were made. Transcripts were reviewed by participants to verify authenticity and correctness.

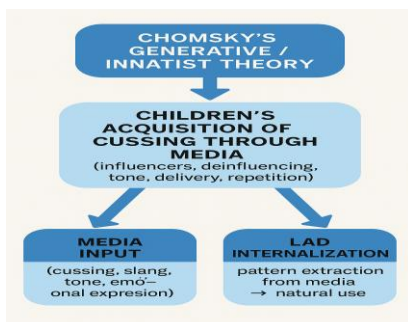


Figure No. 1, Chomsky's Generative/Innatist Theory

Results and Discussion

Guidance Counselors Experiences in Handling Grades 3–6 Learners Referred for Cussing or Inappropriate Language

In the stories of the fifteen (15) guidance counselor-designates, there is an interesting and coherent trend: the progressive normalization of cussing among Grades 3-6 students, not as a single behavioral issue but as a constituent of normal everyday communication. The participants explained the application of cuss words by learners in various contexts such as play, humor, peer bonding and minor disputes indicating that this mode of expression has become part of their natural language repertoire.

This normalization is reflected in the descriptions of the participants:

"They even use it during their playtime, not necessarily in an angry mode, it is a way of speaking." - (P4)

"We listen to it nearly every day now, when we have recess or in group work." - (P1)

"The younger ones are already using these words in a casual manner." - (P11)

These stories lead to one thing, that cussing is no longer viewed as deviant, but as socially and linguistically acceptable. This pattern has a meaning that implies that children are not just engaging in inappropriate behavior but instead internalizing and replicating linguistic input that has been made familiar, frequent and reinforced socially. In a psycholinguistic sense, this is consistent with the research of Timothy Jay (2018), who states that taboo language is especially memorable because of its emotional coloring, which increases its likelihood of reproduction.

On the same note, Rowe and Snow (2020) note that the frequency, quality, and contextual richness of the linguistic input influence the development of language in the child, which supports the notion that normalization increases with repeated exposure. The importance of this finding is that it challenges the traditional school-based meanings of cussing as a merely disciplinary behavior. Rather, the results indicate that cussing can be viewed as a language adjustment to a shifting communicative context, in which digital media is a key figure. Rideout and Robb (2022) underpin this when their work shows that the media that children watch and read has an increasingly greater impact on their language and social actions. Meanwhile, the statistics indicate that normalization cannot be blamed on social media. Social environment, especially home and peer ecology, was also mentioned by the participants, suggesting a more intricate ecological interaction:

"Sometimes they can pick it up because of older siblings or even adults at home." - (P6)

This goes along with more ecological approaches to child development (Navarro et al., 2022), which puts more emphasis on how various environments interact to influence behavior. Therefore, although social media is a prevailing influence, cussing is a product of an intersection of linguistic contributions in contexts. Collectively, these findings indicate that cussing in learners is an outcome of language and social reinforcement as a result of repeatedly being exposed to cussing rather than deliberate deviance. What it suggests is that children normalize the language that they constantly engage with, which is why it is crucial to create such linguistic environments through intentional and guided means.

Linguistic Patterns Guidance Counselors Observed That Suggest the Naturalization of Cussing Among Learners

The dominant trend that can be observed based on the data is the **active imitation of social media influencers** that goes beyond the use of words and includes the tone, the way of speaking, and acting in a manner that is expressive. The participants also noted that the participants repeat not only words they hear online but also the way those words are pronounced, which means that they imitate them on a more profound linguistic and social level. This is shown in the following statements:

"They mimic the pronunciations of the influencer, including facial expressions." - (P9)

"Some students repeat verbatim lines in Tik Tok videos." - (P5)

"It is easy to know that it is a social media because of the dramatic way it is delivered." - (P13)

These results indicate that children are gaining pragmatic competence, or the skills to make good use of language in social settings (Taguchi, 2015). The significance of this pattern is that language is not just a process that involves only vocabulary but also socially situated modes of speaking which is learned through observation and repetition. This is consistent with modern uses of the social learning theory in which behaviors which are commonly perceived, emotionally arousing, and socially valued are more apt to be copied (Teng et al., 2021). Such behaviors are enhanced by social media, especially short-form video applications, where expressive, humor, and highly engaging content are prioritized. The paradoxical nature of deinfluencing the content was also pointed out by the participants, as, although it is corrective, it tends to strengthen cussing by repetition and performance:

"Although the message may be to quit something, the cuss words are present, and therefore the children repeat the cuss words." - (P12)

"They recall the comic side, not the teaching." -(P2)

Abidin (2021) supports this finding by elaborating that the influencer culture functions based on the principles of relatability and performative authenticity, which allows the expressive language to be more memorable and effective. Bishop (2022) also adds that algorithm-based platforms value engagement and will tend to promote emotionally colored content irrespective of the message behind it. The significance of this finding lies in its implication that how language is presented may be more influential than what is being communicated. Even corrective messages may unwittingly support undesired language provided that they are based on repetition and delivery of expression. Another way to interpret it is that imitation can also be a form of belonging and identity formation as learners might use some speech-making patterns to fit in the group. This implies that cussing is not solely linguistically learned but it is a socially negotiated phenomenon. In the end, the results show that social media has emerged as a strong language paradigm, which not only influences the speech of children but also the way in which they speak. The essential conclusion is that children do not only imitate language, they imitate styles and identities of communication.

Guidance Counselors Perceived Influence of Social Media Deinfluencing in Shaping Learners' Language Behavior

The theme that comes out clearly in the data is the **spontaneous and unconscious use of cuss words**, which implies that these words have been instilled in the linguistic system of the learners. The participants always explained that cussing is an automatic process, as it does not involve intention or conscious thought. This can be seen in the following statements:

"It is simply a natural thing to come out, they no longer think about it." -(P6)

"They use those words even when not angry." -(P3)

"It is now in their everyday language" - (P10)

According to these accounts, cussing is now automatized and it is an indication that language has reached high levels of acquisition where language forms can be generated with ease. The interpretation of this discovery is closely related to the Generative/Innatist Theory of Noam Chomsky, who assumes that children learn language by the process of inborn mechanisms triggered by the external stimuli. In this regard, Rowe and Snow (2020) stress that the habitual usage causes the establishment of linguistic patterns, whereas Lieven (2016) points out that habitual use leads to automatic language creation.

These views support the meaning that cussing is not deliberately selected and it is an unconscious one that is learned through constant exposure. This finding is important in that it has implications on intervention. When cussing is automatic, then it cannot be addressed through correction alone, but modification of the language environment and alternative models of language need to be provided. Another reason could be that cussing is a type of expression of emotions that children use, especially when they do not have the words to express some complicated emotions. This implies that linguistic and emotional development are two mechanisms that go hand in hand. The unplanned occurrence of cuss words, in a way, is a linguistic naturalization process wherein with frequent use, cuss words become automatic. These only entails that repetition of language leads to having a language that is repeated as being unconsciously spoken.

Challenges Guidance Counselors Encounter in Addressing Normalized Profanity Among Young Learners

Although the participants were aware of the linguistic character of cussing, they also confirmed that they faced a lot of difficulties in dealing with it in the school setting. One of the common problems was that cussing did not seem to be a problem to learners and this lowers the effectiveness of disciplinary methods used in the past. This is seen in the responses below:

"When we rebuke them but they just laugh at us because they believe that we are only joking." -(P8)

"It is difficult to instill discipline since some parents do not consider it as a problem." -(P12)

"We do not have specific programs to deal with this- it is done on a case-by-case basis." -(P4)

These results indicate that normalization introduces a break between the expectations of the institutions and the perceptions of the learners and complicates intervention. What this means is that behavior cannot be successfully rectified when it is reiteratively reinforced in a variety of settings. This is in line with the findings of Reinke et al. (2016), who note that school-family alignment is important in behavior management. OECD (2021) also reports that socialization processes of children have been reshaped by digital environments, and the old forms of disciplinary strategies are ineffective. The meaning of this discovery is that it requires a change towards systemic and collaborative approaches, which include: parent engagement media literacy education language-awareness programs.

Another way of analyzing it is that the challenge is also an institutional constraint, namely, the absence of special training of teacher-designates in their work with linguistically based behavior. These results eventually point to the fact that a single person cannot be successful in dealing with cussing, but rather a concerted action by school, home, and media settings. The

most important lesson is that the behavior is not correctable when it is constantly normalized by the environments that the child is placed in.

Throughout the themes, the results seem to culminate on a single point: cussing among learners in Grades 3-6 is a socially reinforced, digitally mediated, and linguistically acquired behavior. It is developed by repetition, developed by imitation and socialization and made automatic by constant practice. Instead of cussing being seen merely as a form of misconduct, the findings make it a natural consequence of learning language in a media-filled world. The implications of this reframing to education are significant, as theory-informed, context-sensitive, and collaborative interventions are required.

Taken together, the paper has shown that the language of children is a mirror of the settings they live in and the settings, in turn, are changing, which requires the educators to alter their perception of linguistic conduct and how they react to it.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The lived experience of the guidance counselor-designates in the Milagros West District sheds light on the changing status of the language used among the Grades 3-6 students, especially the increased normalization of cussing as a normal mode of communication. The results indicate that the use of inappropriate language by learners is no longer restricted to the situations of conflicts or emotional outbursts, but it has become a part and parcel of the everyday life, jokes, and interactions with peers. This change is part of a wider change in the linguistic environments of children, in which digital media (social media platforms and influencer content) is a prominent source of language input. Through their close interaction with the learners, guidance counselor-designates acknowledge that cussing is not only a disciplinary issue but rather a linguistic phenomenon which is conditioned by repeated exposure, imitation and social reinforcement. Students show the skills to use cuss words both spontaneously and contextually, and not always knowing what they mean, which shows that cuss language has been internalized in the process of natural acquisitions. This is congruent with the perception that children are acquiring language patterns in the surrounding in which they encounter emotionally expressive patterns and have come across frequently.

Meanwhile, the experiences of counselor-designates demonstrate the complications and difficulties of dealing with this behavior. Students tend to find cussing acceptable or funny, which diminishes the efficiency of the corrective actions. Additionally, normalization of such language is further promoted by the impact of the home settings and peer groups, which causes discrepancies between the expectations at school and the lived experiences of learners. In this regard, the guidance counselor-designates find themselves in a tough situation- having to deal with a behavior that is highly entrenched in greater social and linguistic frameworks. These facts demonstrate an important issue of concern: schools still continue to treat cussing as a behavioral problem, even though it is evident that cussing is rooted in language acquisition and through media. Although the current policies focus on discipline and child protection, they tend to be ineffective in terms of linguistic and contextual aspects of the issue. This leads to counselor-designates depending on case-by-case interventions, which, despite good intentions, are inadequate in dealing with a phenomenon of a systemic nature.

Results of this paper highlights the importance of redefining cussing in a learner-based context not as a bad habit, but as a normal language behavior, which is conditioned by the modern communicative contexts. This distinction is critical in providing better, responsive and contextually aware approaches in the educational system.

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Competing Interests Statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study; all data used were obtained from previously published sources as cited in the reference list.

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Appendices

No appendices are attached to this study.