Teaching Taboo in the Classroom

Georgeta Raţă, Elena-Mirela Samfira

Banat’s University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine “King Michael I of Romania” Address: 300645 - Timişoara, 119, Calea Aradului, Romania

Abstract

The goal of the paper is to show how important it is to teach taboo in the classroom. The teaching of taboos is a rather new approach in education. Based on both classical (language dictionaries) and modern (internet sites) sources, the authors define taboo with the help of both English language dictionaries and specialised dictionaries and encyclopaedias, and provide the etymology and the typology of the word taboo (acts/actions/activities/behaviours, objects, people, places, times, and words) going from traditional to current ones. The degree of novelty of the paper is rather high. Research limitations are due to the lack of studies on this topic in Romanian literature. The implications are deep and closely related to the degree of relevance of the paper.

Keywords: Taboo, Teaching taboo, Definition of taboo, Etymology of taboo, Typology of taboo.

1. Introduction

Teaching taboo in the classroom is a rather new approach in education [1] because, though our world has been constantly changing, our schools have not. Curricular reforms in this respect were advocated in the 1980s and 1990s, and language courses were suggested as vectors due to their communicative approach and because controversial topics encourage students to speak [2, 3]. Given the current European context, constant exposure to both taboo language and taboo topics can no longer be ignored. Teaching taboos such as abortion, addictions, AIDS, animal rights, anxiety and depression, bad breath, begging, Big Brother, boxing, bribery and corruption, bullfighting, changing sex, cheating, children who kill, compensation culture, cosmetic surgery, death, death penalty, designer babies, gay families, gays and jobs, guns, human cloning, immigration and racism, the Ku Klux Klan, legalising drugs, marriage, national stereotypes, nudity, old age, politically incorrect jokes, prostitution, questions you cannot ask, right to die, sale of human organs, sexual harassment, sport and money, swearing, telling lies, thin legs, torture, turning the other cheek, vanity [4] with courage and imagination [5] is important from the perspective of critical thinking, cross-cultural competence, cultural awareness, and intercultural competence.

Before we introduce taboo in the classroom – and, with it, problem-posing and question-asking [5] – we need to know what a taboo is, where it comes from and how many types of taboo there are.

2. Material and Method

Based on both classical (language dictionaries) and modern (internet sites) sources, the authors define taboo with both English language dictionaries and specialised dictionaries and encyclopaedias, and provide the etymology and the typology of taboo (acts, actions, activities or behaviours, objects, people, places, times, and words).
3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Definition of Taboo

Taboos have been studied by anthropologists: the British Mary Douglas (1921-2007); archivists and librarians: the French Georges Bataille (1897-1962); captains: the British James Cook (1728-1779); cultural anthropologists: the American Margaret Mead (1901-1978); ethnologists: the British Robert Ranulph Maret (1866-1943) and the Czech Franz Baermann Steiner (1909-1952); ethnographers: the French Charles-Arnold Kurr van Gennep (1873-1957); folklorists: the Soviet Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp (1895-1970); linguists and anthropologists: the American Roger Keesing (1935-1993); neurologists: the Austrian Sigmund Freud (1856-1939); orientalists: the Scottish William Robertson Smith (1846-1917); social anthropologists: the Scottish James George Frazer (1854-1941), the English Alfred-Reginald Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955), the British Edmund Ronald Leach (1910-1988), the Norwegian Fredrik Barth (1928-), and the British Alfred Antony Francis Gell (1945-1997); sociologists: the French David Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) and the British Hutton Webster (1875-1955).

The English word taboo/tabu can be a noun, an adjective or a verb.

As Fowles [6] noted, “When we talk about taboo, we frequently have in mind prohibitions surrounding access to, contact with, or consumption of things.” But what is a taboo?

English language dictionaries define the noun taboo/tabu as:

- “1. A ban or inhibition resulting from social custom or emotional aversion. 2. a. A prohibition, especially in Polynesia and other South Pacific islands, excluding something from use, approach, or mention because of its sacred and inviolable nature. b. An object, word, or act protected by such a prohibition.” [7];
  - “A refusal to allow: ban, disallowance, forbiddance, inhibition, interdiction, prohibition, proscription.” [8];
  - “1. (Sociology) any prohibition resulting from social or other conventions. 2. (Anthropology & Ethnology) ritual restriction or prohibition, esp. of something that is considered holy or unclean.” [9];
  - “Prohibition, ban, restriction, disapproval, anathema, interdict, proscription: Not all men respect the taboo against bedding a friend’s woman.” [10];
  - “1. a prohibition or interdiction of anything; exclusion from use or practice: One of the strongest taboos in all modern societies is against incest. Synonyms: ban, proscription, embargo, interdiction; no-no. 2. a. the system, practice, or act whereby things are set apart as sacred, forbidden for general use, or placed under a prohibition or interdiction. b. the condition of being so set apart, forbidden, or interdicted. 3. exclusion from social relations; ostracism.” [11];
  - “1. a cultural or religious custom that does not allow people to do, use or talk about a particular thing as people find it offensive or embarrassing: an incest taboo, a taboo on working on a Sunday, to break/violate a taboo. Death is one of the great taboos in our culture. 2. a general agreement not to do something or talk about something: The subject is still a taboo in our family.” [12];
  - “1. a prohibition or interdiction of something; exclusion from use or practice. 2. the system or practice of setting things apart as sacred or forbidden for general use. 3. exclusion from social relations; ostracism.” [13];
  - “1. A word of Polynesian/Melanesian origin which is used in anthropology to refer to an action, object, or space which society regards as forbidden. For example, in many societies, incest is taboo. 2. A prohibition that a society places on a particular form of behaviour. [11];
  - “1. A prejudice (especially in Polynesia and other South Pacific islands) that prohibits the use or mention of something because of its sacred nature. 2. An inhibition or ban resulting from social custom or emotional aversion.” [14].

A taboo is, therefore, anathema, avoidance, ban, disallowance, disapproval, embargo, exclusion from use/practice, forbiddance, inhibition, interdict, interdiction, no-no, ostracism, prohibition, proscription, refusal to allow, or restriction excluding something from use (object, people, word), approach in space and time (act/action/behaviour, object, people, word), or mention/talk (act/action/behaviour, object, people, word). The act/action/behaviour, object, people, or words are, thus, protected by such a prohibition resulting from emotional aversion,
religious custom, social convention, or social custom.

Specialised dictionaries and encyclopaedias define the noun taboo/tabu as:
- “Avoidance of a specific behaviour for fear of harm by a dangerous power, or of dangerous pollution caused by the intermixing of incompatible powers.” [15];
- “Prohibition.” [16];
- “A social prohibition or restriction sanctioned by suprasocietal (innate) means or a socially sanctioned injunction alleged to have the force of such a prohibition.” [17];
- “A collective prohibition which is to be obeyed categorically, without question.” [18];
- “Prohibition grounded in custom or religion rather than in bureaucratic law or common sense and hence bearing some moral weight.” [19];
- “A wide range of vernacular beliefs that forbid certain actions for fear that they will lead to a catastrophe afflicting the surrounding community.” [20];
- “A descriptive term for words, objects, actions, or people that are forbidden by a group or culture.” [21];
- “A ban or an inhibition resulting from social custom or emotional aversion.” [22];
- “A place, food, activity that is forbidden.” [23].

Symbol systems expressing complex relationships between nature and culture [Levi-Strauss].” [24].

In this case, taboo is synonym only of avoidance, prohibition, and restriction, which points to its normative, prescriptive role. Here again, prohibition excludes something from use (object, people, place, word), approach in space and time (action/activity, object, people, place, word), or mention/talk (action/activity, object, people, place, word). The action/activity, object (food), people, place, or word, are, thus, protected by such a prohibition resulting from emotional aversion (mainly fears: fear of dangerous pollution caused by the intermixing of incompatible powers, fear of harm by a dangerous power, fear that action will lead to a catastrophe afflicting the surrounding community), religion, or social custom [25].

Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud was the first to consider the contrary meanings of taboo words to be of particular significance for both language and the unconscious: “It is difficult for us to find a translation for [the word taboo], since the concept connoted by it is one which we no longer possess. It was still current among the ancient Romans, whose sacer was the same as the Polynesian taboo… The meaning of taboo, as we see it, diverges in two contrary directions. To us it means, on the one hand, ‘sacred’, ‘consecrate’, and on the other ‘uncanny, ‘dangerous’, ‘forbidden’, ‘unclean.’” [26]

3.2. Etymology of Taboo

The word taboo or tabu comes from the Proto-Polynesian *tapu < Proto-Oceanic *tabu ‘sacred, forbidden’. The noun and verb are English innovations first recorded in Captain James Cook’s book, “A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean” (1777) [27]. Cook was the British explorer who led three expeditions to the Pacific Ocean and greatly broadened European knowledge about the peoples living on the Pacific islands.

3.3. Typology of Taboo

Are taboos acts/actions/activities/behaviours, objects, people, places, times, and words:
- acts/actions/activities/behaviours: begging (discouraged in Islam, but promoted as a spiritual ideal on Hinduism and Buddhism), committing incest (all over the world), committing suicide (in Christianism, Islam, Judaism), corpse loving (necrophilia), cross-dressing (among the Amish, Orthodox Jews), cutting hair (identified with sexual potency, on all continents), dreaming (because, according to Goya, “the sleep of reason produces monsters”), dying (because corpses are a source of pollution in Hinduism, Judaism), eating corpses (necrophagy), fishing (in Japan, Scotland), having sex (mentioning how people cope or what their sexual identity is), joking (in reaction to political censorship), knotting or tying hair (in India, Indonesia, Lapland, North Borneo, Scotland), listening to the song of the Siren (in Ancient Greece), living alone (in Judaism), looking (because of the evil eye, in Ancient Greece, Romania), man-eating (anthropophagy or cannibalism), painting (Abstraction, Buddhist art, Cubism, Dadaism, Expressionism, Fauvism, perspective, Surrealism, traditional Chinese art), playing music (atonal music, jazz, the diminished fifth or augmented fourth, twelve-tone compositions), playing rags (depending
on season, in India), polluting (through birth of twins, childbirth, death, eating polluted food, engaging in forbidden pursuits, initiation, profanation of a sacred precinct, non-observance of Shinto norms, touching a polluted person, war, woman’s menses), practicing cunnilingus (in Christianity), practicing fellatio (in the U.S.A.), practicing fetishism (using the Christian crucifix, religious relics and icons, goods in capitalist economy, substitutes for the sexual object), practicing onanism (in Christianity), praising (in Iran, Israel, Romania, Russia, Scotland, and Turkey, because of the evil eye; remedies: blessing those who sneeze, tipping the waiters), procreating (in Babylon), seeing (because of the evil eye, in Ancient Greece, Romania), speaking (among neophytes), staring (because of the evil eye), trading (pigs, in Hawaii), urinating against certain trees (among neophytes of Zimbabwe), washing hair (in Hinduism), whistling (associated with deserting houses in Romania, with sorcery and the casting of spells in Islam), writing (in dictatorships);

- objects (and their features): colours – blue (denotes brutality and the obscene – Blue Movies), green (is the colour of malignant fairies), red (linked with danger, passion, and shame – in Hawaii, Madagascar, New Guinea, North America, New Zealand), yellow (symbolises both envy, jealousy, treachery – Judas is painted in yellow garments and the doors of traitors and felons were daubed in yellow in 16th century France – and disease); foods (fasting in Preliterate Societies, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Judaism – where it has to be halal, Ancient Greece and Rome, Christianity, Islam – where it has to be halal) – beans (in Antiquity, because they upset the tranquillity of mind necessary for prophetic dreams), bears (in Buddhism), camels (in Hinduism; in Judaism, because they are ruminants that do not have the requisite cloven hoofs; in Mandaism; in Zoroastrianism), cereals (in Taoism, because they are the main food of the malicious spirits inhabiting the body), cows (because it is sacred in Buddhism, Hinduism), dogs (in Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Zoroastrianism, but they are eaten in China, Hawaii, New Zealand, Nigeria, and Tahiti), eggs (the Ancient Greeks, the indigenous people of central Australia, the Inuit, the Keffi Yegomawa of Nigeria, the Konde of Tanganyika), elephants (in Buddhism), ergot fungus (for its use as a drug under the name LSD), fish (in Syria), fish with a red belly (to neophytes of Zimbabwe), frogs (in Buddhism, in New Guinea), garlic (in Buddhism, Hinduism), horses (in Buddhism, Christianism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism), human flesh (among cannibalic peoples), hyenas (in Buddhism), lions (in Buddhism), milk (in East Africa, China, Israel – in combination with milk, in Angola, Burma, Congo, Greece, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Mozambique, among vegans), mushrooms (in Papua New Guinea), onions (in Buddhism, Hinduism), otters (in Thailand), oysters (in Buddhism, Judaism), panthers (in Buddhism), peyote cactus (because of its high content of mescaline), pigs (in Judaism, Islam), pomegranates (in Ancient Greece), possum (in New Guinea, South America), rice boiled with red beans (on board Japanese boats), rabbits, rice gruel (on board Japanese boats), salt (in New Guinea, it is produced from plants resembling the tail of a possum, a forbidden animal), San Pedro cactus (because of its high content of mescaline), scallion (in Buddhism, Hinduism), snails (in New Guinea), snakes (in Buddhism), soma (in Hinduism), tigers (in Buddhism), tortoises (in Thailand), vinegar (on board Japanese boats), wine (in Islam); items – cannabis (illegal in most Western countries, but sacred for the Ancient World and for the Rastafarians of Jamaica), chopsticks (in Japan, to eat rice), clothes (among neophytes, in Ancient Rome, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism), dolls (invested with the powers and taboos of idols and effigies), flutes (in Columbia, New Guinea), icons (in Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece, Christianity, Islam, Judaism), mirrors (dangerous for the dead, demons, spirits and vampires, in Europe, India, Madagascar, North America), pornography (books, films, paintings, photographs, sculptures, and videos intending to sexually excite the observer – in Christianity), puppets (invested with the powers and taboos of idols and effigies), tobacco (in Christianity);
people: body – corpse (because it contaminates the living and the sacred), nudity; body secretions – excrement or faeces (in Christianism, Hinduism, Islam), menstruation (retirement of women to menstrual huts in Japan), spittle (in Christianism, Hinduism), sweat, urine (in Hinduism); body parts – clitoris, the left hand (associated with sorcery and evil in Nigeria, with treachery and fraud, with impurity in Islam), vagina (in Christianity); disabilities and deformities – bad nails (in Hinduism), black teeth (in Judaism), disfigured people (in Judaism), dwarfs (in Judaism), eunuchs (in Judaism), Flamen Dialis (the Ancient Rome priest), freckles (in Ancient Greece), hunchbacks, lame people (in Judaism), one-eyed men, overweight people (in Hinduism), people with a disease of the eyes or of the skin (in Judaism), people with an injured arm or foot (in Judaism), people with open wounds (in Hinduism); individuals – parents-in-law (in North America), strangers (a universal taboo manifest today in the suspicion of refugees and immigrants, racist abuse and attacks and the exaggerated nationalism of certain football fans; strangers are considered cannibals, dangerous people, drug peddlers, infectors of citizens, infidels, magicians, malicious people, monsters, possessors of evil eye, rapists, spies, underminers of morality, witches – and they become the useful scapegoat towards whom all the aggregation of the populace can be directed), twins (considered anomalous in Africa and North America), untouchables (a group of social outcasts in India);

- places: cross-roads (in Antiquity, because they were places of dangers, haunted by spirits, demons, ghosts, gods), direction (in Taoism), harem (in Islam), mosques (that need to be haraman, in Islam), mountains (because of the demons and ghosts they hide), North-East (as an inauspicious direction; according to the laws of the feng-shui, the bathroom and kitchen of a house should never be placed on the N-E side of a house), precincts of shrines and sacred buildings (in Taoism);

- time – certain days (in Taoism);

- words – language taboos when stalking game (in Japan), naming.

Breaking taboos consists in attending a carnival, synonymous to breaking taboos before the austerity of Lent; playing “rough music” (charivari, in France; haberfeld-treiben, thierjagen, and katzenmusik, in Germany; scampanate, in Italy) is a manifestation of social disapproval; sin-eating, i.e. appropriation of somebody else’s sins (in Great Britain).

Current taboo ideas/subjects are extensions of taboos to other aspects of social life, pointing to a shift from sacred to profane:

- social class, in the U.S.A. [28];

- age of ladies, discriminatory language, income, marital status, politics, religion, salary, weight in the U.S.A., but not in China [29];

- academic freedom, adoption rights, age of sexual consent, capital punishment, child molestation, colonialism, corporal punishment, debunking cultural, religious, scientific, etc. “truths”, drugs, environment, harassment, infanticide, innate group differences, IQ, legalisation of distasteful but victimless practices, misuses of the Holocaust and other disasters, organ transplant, overuses of charges of anti-Semitism, profiling, racism, sexism, prostitution, race, rape, religion and atheism, revenge, taboo language and freedom of speech, the rights of the accused, and torture (issues of a course at the Harvard Law School) [30].

4. Conclusion

Teaching taboo in the classroom has become a must since it has shifted to such aspects of social life as social class, age of ladies, discriminatory language, income, etc., or academic freedom.

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