

Taboo Topics: Protective Filter or Counterproductive Censorship?

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Introduction

The diversity of EFL classroom situations in Japan can make it very difficult to draw comparisons. From commercial language schools to corporate English programs to formal education, with *raisons d'être* ranging from language learning and job hunting to commercial exploitation and entertainment, teachers are faced with a wide spectrum of demands and expectations from students, employers, and administrators. Even when the field is narrowed to formal education and viewed from a pedagogical perspective, there are significant disparities in factors such as course content (from complete autonomy to assigned textbooks that account for every minute of lesson time), class size (from two to well over a hundred), language of instruction (from English-only classrooms to classes where students do not respond to either Japanese or native-speaker teachers who speak to them in English), student motivation (from demanding to apathetic and even hostile), and allowance for authentic communication (from totally scripted lessons to classrooms in which spontaneous, creative use of language is encouraged). Little wonder, then, that there are divergent views on virtually everything from course content and materials to teaching methodology to classroom at-

mosphere. These views are often influenced by the desire to surmount perceived constraints and obstacles that impede the teacher's ability to get on with the business of teaching.

Some teachers—especially those with younger, lower-level, less mature, and less confident students in larger classes—may turn to more expedient means of conducting their classes: teacher-centered methodologies that require students to repeat and respond but not create meaningful exchanges, text materials dealing with predictable subject matter, and patterned behavior and speech featuring a high degree of repetition, redundancy, and routine. However, best-laid plans are all too easily foiled by the unexpected, in the form of the students' moods, interests, interrelationships, and appetites. Nothing can bring a lesson to a screeching halt like a student bursting into tears, so it is not surprising that many teachers make a concerted effort to not simply minimize but actually eliminate the unforeseen. One way is by making certain subject matter off limits in the classroom, in particular sensitive topics that might upset students, controversial topics that might create friction among the students, or suggestive topics that might confuse or mislead the students about right and wrong. The question is whether or not these taboos might be misguided attempts to shelter the students from harm that actually isolate the classroom from the real world, censor classroom content and communication, and even subvert the teacher's role as an educator. This article will explore the nature, practicability, and potential consequences of imposing taboo topics, and consider alternative classroom techniques that may better serve the teacher's pedagogical purposes.

Teachers' opinions about taboo topics

One thing I look forward to in my MATESOL courses on Media-

Assisted Language Teaching is discussions about what the participants feel they would like to do in their classes but cannot for one reason or another—i.e., the “Yes, but ...” syndrome: “I wish I could do that, but I can’t because ...,” followed by reasons such as “I don’t have enough lesson time,” “I’m too busy with other duties,” “There’s nobody else I can talk to or collaborate with,” and “my students can’t (or won’t) do that.” Some of these are clearly insurmountable obstacles that are completely beyond their control, but others are more a matter of interpretation and can be resolved, alleviated, or circumvented with some imagination and resourcefulness. Of particular interest to me are “Yes, buts” about subject matter. I am often told that teachers want to deal with certain topics but are afraid to because of problems that might arise if they do so. Their concerns are therefore not about providing students with interesting topics that will motivate them to learn the vocabulary and skills they need to communicate about them, but rather about what kinds of topics are appropriate—or, more to the point, what kinds of topics are somehow risky and therefore to be avoided. “Taboo topics” commonly cited in my MATESOL classes include sex, politics, religion, death, bad language, and drugs and alcohol.

Many of the rationales cited for instituting taboos on classroom content are protective in nature: to shelter impressionable youths from bad social or linguistic influences (e.g., bad language or questionable behavior such as smoking and drinking), to avoid upsetting students with unpleasant thoughts (e.g., reminders of sick or deceased loved ones, divorced parents, or financial problems) or undue stress (i.e., the desire to create a non-threatening classroom environment), and to prevent friction among students who disagree with each other about specific issues. Other rationales cited by teachers are personal (fear of reprisal if students’ parents complain, or personal discomfort with certain subjects).

While it is easy and expedient to simply avoid these kinds of topics, a deeper analysis of this issue can address some teachers' concerns and allow them to provide their students with a richer learning experience while reducing the risk factor. This paper will explore the reasons for taboos further, examine the positive and negative effects of taboos, and suggest alternative pedagogical approaches to imposing taboo topics.

Literature Review

Kaye's (2006) accounting of arguments in favor of taboos in the classroom is mostly based on risk—the risk of offending learners' beliefs, giving students language that they might misuse, conflict developing among students while discussing controversial issues, or students feeling bad when reminded of negative experiences. The only other arguments he presents question whether or not those teaching objectives *can* be achieved in other ways—i.e., not saying that taboo topics *should* be used, but that they *can* be used. On the other hand, his corresponding list of arguments against taboos basically argues that taboo topics *should* be used—i.e., they comprise key elements of culture, they serve as examples for appropriateness of language, they provide essential experience in understanding and coping with real-life situations in which taboo topics and language arise, they are a rich source of linguistic learning, and they bring greater authenticity to the classroom. He adds that using taboo topics can make lessons more interesting and broadens the scope of lessons beyond what standard textbooks cover.

In his analysis of textbook content, Hird (2007) found that topics rarely included political freedoms, democracy and socialism, revolution and terrorism, religious beliefs and atheism, trade unions and working conditions, depression, drug and alcohol abuse, death and suicide, racial abuse, obscene gestures and swearing, pregnancy and abortion, poly-

amy, AIDS, rape, and nudity—all of which are controversial and virtually all of which would generally be labelled as negative or risky by publishers of English language teaching (ELT) materials, labelled by Hird as “an enormous filter excluding what are for most people everyday issues because they are deemed to be taboo or controversial.” As a result, “present day mainstream EFL materials do not cover everything that learners may want to talk about” (2007). In an earlier study, Acklam (1996, cited by Hird) found that conception, birth, illness, death, and poverty were found to be completely missing from 50 EFL textbooks, religion and war were rarely included, and the most common topics included “safe” subjects including cars and motoring, charity, entertainment, fashion and clothes, holidays, and hotels.

Taboos and Teaching Methodologies

Japanese language learners continue to perform poorly in terms of English proficiency—a study by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) ranked Japanese TOEFL examinees #133 in the world (2000). This suggests that the Japanese educational system at large is not doing an effective job of training young Japanese to use English as a functional tool for international communication. This is corroborated by the five-year plan for educational reform announced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, Sports, and Technology, with the goal of producing “Japanese with English abilities.” In the words of Minister Toyama, “At present ... due to the lack of sufficient ability, many Japanese are restricted in their exchanges with foreigners and their ideas or opinions are not evaluated appropriately” (2003). This brings into question long-institutionalized teaching approaches such as Grammar Translation and textbook lessons emphasizing rote work, which have long been criticized for being geared towards preparing students for entrance examinations

rather than developing communicative competency. Prominent among the alternative approaches is the use of authentic materials, especially focusing on current and relevant subject matter such as global issues. However, there continues to be resistance to alternative approaches, and for a variety of reasons: my MATESOL students, in debating the use of authentic materials, have cited various arguments against movies, television shows, songs, advertisements, and literature. Some of their arguments are ideological in nature, either reflecting the teacher's personal beliefs or their assumptions about the students' political, religious, sexual, or other beliefs. In addition to that, some believe that depiction of drug, tobacco, or alcohol use/abuse, graphic or even implied violence, intense scenes of suspense, and anything else considered controversial is inappropriate. Other arguments against using authentic media tend to be based on objective rather than subjective criteria and do not really address the question of whether or not the subject matter is appropriate: environmental factors that are generally beyond the teacher's control (e.g., lack of audiovisual equipment, classroom size, noise from adjacent classrooms or complaints from adjacent classrooms about noise, and lack of time), linguistic factors (difficulty of comprehending natural speed, ungraded vocabulary, colloquialisms, and other kinds of non-standard English), and motivational factors (inattentiveness due to difficulty of materials, time of day, drowsiness after lunch, etc.).

Dealing with these kinds of potential problems is an inherent and continuing challenge that all teachers may face in any lesson. We have all had a lesson or activity work like a charm with one class but fall flat with another class—even if the two classes are at the same school with students of the same profile and at the same proficiency level, held on the same day of the week at the same time of day in the same room. And in group lessons, even demographically identical students can differ

in terms of overseas experience, maturity, confidence, motivation, and receptivity to the teacher, subject matter, or activity. Furthermore, some students may struggle with certain textbook activities that others may find easy, while some students may be bored by topics and activities that others find fascinating.

These discrepancies can become more pronounced when dealing with authentic (i.e., ungraded) materials because they deal with controversial issues as a matter of course. Any one movie, TV program, song, or news report may touch on several different topics of interest and/or concern to adults and often teens. Using these kinds of materials in class calls for flexibility, resourcefulness, ingenuity, and creativity in order to avoid overwhelming students with a two-pronged assault of challenging content framed within challenging language: e.g., pre-teaching, gist work, selective input (silent viewing, use of shorter segments), and repeated viewings/listenings to focus the students' attention. Lack of confidence is a characteristic many Japanese learners of English display when they say they cannot understand a thing, they need more help from the teacher, and they want to hear listening passages again before proceeding to the output stage. This dissuades some teachers from using more challenging materials and topics. However, completely ruling out materials such as movies, music, and literature severely limits the teacher's ability to offer students a well-rounded course of English learning. Teachers would be forced to rely entirely on ELT publications without recourse to complementary or even supplementary authentic media that would bring authentic listening (movies, TV), up-to-date subject matter (TV news or newspaper articles), and useful materials of inherent interest to students (their favorite movie stars or singers) into the classroom. In the same way, imposing taboo topics would deprive teachers of interesting and stimulating topics.

Definition of terms

It is my contention that imposing blanket taboos on subject matter because of potential risks or challenges is an overreaction that unnecessarily limits the resources available to teachers and arbitrarily constrains what can be accomplished in the classroom. In this paper, I will show how an understanding of media literacy and tolerance can help teachers develop the flexibility to make risky topics useful and exploit erstwhile taboos.

Let us begin with an anecdote that illustrates the importance of establishing clear definitions of the terms we are working with: during the summer of 2007, visitors to the website of the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles found that the museum's Holocaust Section, Tolerance Center, and Artifacts Room were all inaccessible due to renovation. The explanation read: "We ask for your Tolerance while we are under construction ...". The upper-case "T" tipped readers off to a play on words reminding them that the definition of "tolerance" is not limited to the arena of global affairs (e.g., religious tolerance, political tolerance)—it also has more mundane applications such as tolerance for pain and parental tolerance.

Ironically, teachers who introduce the subject of tolerance meaning "lack of bias" may not be practicing tolerance in all of its meanings. As teachers, we need to tolerate factors such as the immaturity of younger students, the instinctive reticence of less confident students, the aggressiveness of more confident students, and some students' lack of everything ranging from experience to knowledge, patience to etiquette, and vocabulary to spelling. Even with group lessons involving older and higher-level students, there are constant reminders that some or even all of the students may not be mentally, emotionally, intellectually, or

experientially up to all of the challenges we pose. That adds up to a staggering list of “do’s and don’ts” the average teacher would be hard-pressed to simply remember, let alone consciously put into practice.

At the same time, the restrictive nature of taboos can be seen as self-defeating because it instills the students with curiosity about their nature, scope, and rationale. While the effectiveness of taboos has a direct correlation to their relation to respect for authority and fear of punishment, proof that forbidden fruit is inherently tempting are legend. In the Bible alone, we can find the stories of Eve in the Garden of Eden, Jesus in the desert, Lot gazing back at Sodom and Gomorrah, Nimrod and the Tower of Babel, and the Prodigal Son. Prohibition invites curiosity. Furthermore, even if teachers today can insulate their students from potentially bad influences in the classroom on moral or other grounds, it is impossible to control what happens outside of the classroom. Perceived bad influences such as bad and corrupt language, graphic sex and violence, and drugs and alcohol can be found in public places without any effort at all. Considering that two 50-minute (junior high, high school) lessons comprise only 1.3% of a one-week period and two 90-minute (university) lessons represent only 2.0% of a week, there may be few lessons to be learned or remembered from taboos imposed only in the classroom.

Influence of media

The fact of the matter is that today’s younger generation enjoys far greater media accessibility than not only their parents but even their older siblings: the television generation has given way to the computer generation, analog media to digital media, and pocket pagers to mobile telephones, which now feature videocameras, voice recorders, Internet access, and e-mail capability, giving today’s young people potentially the

highest level of media literacy in history.

Even if a teacher is successful in making his/her classroom a sheltered environment, it is impossible to disengage the students from what they are already exposed to outside of school. With that in mind, it is arguable that taboos may actually undermine the teacher's role. If teachers have strong ideological objections to certain topics, they can educate their students more by teaching what is wrong with those topics than by pretending they do not exist. Whether a given taboo comes from the teacher, the institution, or a textbook publisher, the latter approach may reflect a lack of trust in the students' judgment and a lack of respect for their ability to learn how to make better judgments.

Regardless of the teaching method and philosophies employed, then, as long as there is any room for student input and questions, there is always a chance that a student will have a question about something they read or heard outside of the classroom, for example about a recent news story. Once such a question has been posed or a reaction made, the barrier of the taboo has been breached. Even if the teacher refuses to answer or otherwise address the subject, it has been planted in the other students' minds, and an inherent flaw in the practice of establishing taboo topics has been uncovered. The unforeseen can manifest itself at any time: for example, there is always the chance that a student has lost a loved one. Many teachers are not privy to information such as the death of a loved one so, if the subject arises in the classroom, either through the teacher's design or using the assigned text materials, there is a possibility that a bereaved student will become upset. It is therefore understandable that some teachers, especially those with younger students, try to simply avoid the risk altogether by avoiding such topics.

However, those topics can still arise in other ways: a biographical textbook unit may explain how the person being profiled died, a student

might ask a question about something he/she saw in the news relating to death, everybody might be talking about a celebrity death, or there might be a schoolwide announcement about a school-related death. No matter what the teacher does, then, it is virtually impossible to ensure that these topics will never come up. It is therefore incumbent on the teacher to (1) accept the fact that taboos are not foolproof by being ready for the unexpected (e.g., controversial topics arising suddenly) and (2) deal with such situations in a sensitive manner.

An argument against taboo topics

Rather than trying to ignore the reality of the matter by declaring certain subject matter taboo, then, it can be more constructive for teachers to exploit the high degree of media accessibility consumption among their students. Even teachers who do not believe in establishing classroom taboos understand that anything can happen at any time; however introducing such topics with care can yield very positive results. O'Brien advocates the teaching of democratic discussion and dialogue over combative debate to create an environment in which students can "work toward clarifying and exploring the many facets of an issue by engaging in discussions that do not seek win/lose resolutions" (2006). This includes the teaching of logic, argumentation, and playing the devil's advocate. Awkward moments are more likely to arise in lessons that routinely deal with controversial issues; on the other hand, teachers who take this riskier approach are more likely to have experienced and learned how to cope with certain kinds of classroom crises. For those who haven't, the allure of taboos is understandable. But, as long as there are ways in which delicate issues can creep into a lesson, imposing taboo topics may only be delaying the inevitable-in that case, the teacher's time and efforts might be better served trying to be prepared

for delicate classroom situations when they arise. Death is a way of life, as are disease, sex, politics, religion, and war. Korst argues that “In truth, everyone thinks about the taboo topics of death and sex. The problem is, we’ve allowed our society to condition us to feel dirty when having sexual thoughts or morbid when contemplating death. While death is unpleasant and sex is private, they are both a part of life. There is no sense in ignoring them, just as it would be senseless to ignore other basic bodily functions like breathing” (2007).

Returning to the issue of defining terms, how does a teacher explain the parameters of a taboo topic? For example, trying to specify what “sex” means using concrete examples would necessitate the use of more advanced vocabulary (*suggestive, prurient, titillating*) and a level of detail that could itself violate the taboo. No surprise, then, that taboos are easier to articulate in broader terms (*e.g.*, “*Never talk about sex.*”). However, the very ambiguity of that breadth renders the parameters for definition almost infinite: for example, without further elaboration, “sex” could conceivably be construed to mean “gender issues,” thus covering subjects as disparate as procreation, love and marriage, family, and fashion (the unisex look). Moreover, it could also expand to other areas that do not necessarily connote gender, such as crime (discrimination and abuse), politics and governance (male-only monarchies, patriarchal/matriarchal societies), language (euphemisms, suffixes denoting gender), and literature (romance novels, Japanese comics books targeted at male/female readers). It is therefore easy to see how taboo topics are much easier to discuss than to implement. Indeed, the only way to make a taboo perfectly clear is by imposing it *ex post facto*-i.e., “Don’t talk about that (in class) again!” or “Don’t say that (in class) again!”

Such broad categorizations can entrap not only those who are hearing/reading them but even those who try to articulate them: Baker ex-

plains that “a taboo topic for Thai speakers which is not taboo for English speakers is royalty. Thais do not openly criticize their royal family and are often shocked by the irreverent attitude of both British and Australian English speakers to the British royal family” (2003). But the taboo topic is in fact not the Thai royal family per se—it is *criticism* of the Thai royal family. This clearly illustrates how difficult taboo topics, especially those targeting broader topic areas, are to create and implement. Those who would apply the broader term “the Thai royal family” (or perceive the taboo in that manner) are ruling out all mention of the Thai royal family. What, then, about the countless people who visit Thai restaurants all around the world every day and ask who the people in the ubiquitous portraits are? This is the opening line in a perfectly natural and inoffensive conversation that the average Thai would be very proud to take part in, but one that would be preempted by the imposition of a blanket taboo topic.

On the other hand, broader definitions can be used in ways that would not create taboos but strengthen the argument against them. Rather than trying in vain to “play it safe” by keeping certain topic out of the classroom, teachers can work to circumvent problems by broadening topics in ways that allow them to go off on related tangents rather than awkwardly changing the subject to something completely different. Figure 1 uses concentric circles to show how cancer falls under the general topic of disease, which in turn falls under the more general topic of health. Working in the opposite direction, we can see that health includes not only disease but also physical fitness, while disease includes not only cancer but also the common cold.

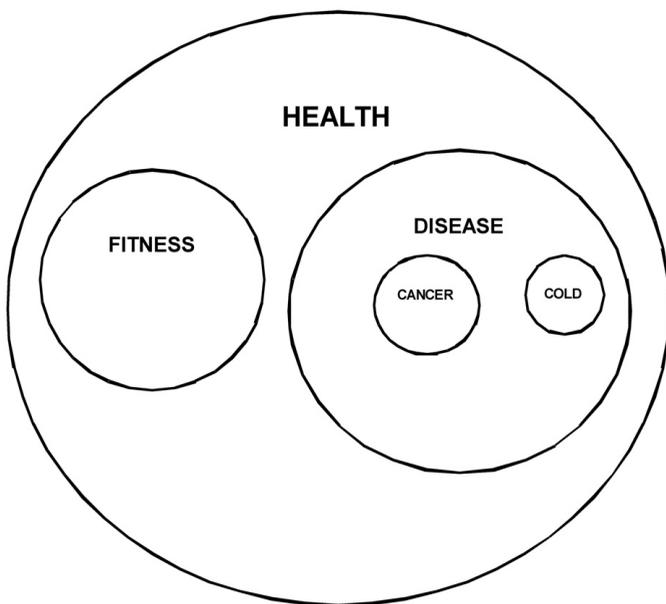


Figure 1: Broadening the definition of terms beyond risky parameters

Thus, if teachers sense that a delicate situation is developing, they can shift the topic to something related but less volatile. Within the context of an English-language lesson, related teaching points like vocabulary building are always viable. This tangential approach is less obvious and awkward than suddenly cutting off an activity and changing the subject to something completely different or telling the students to turn to another page in their textbooks. The mind maps in Figures 2 and 3 show how teachers can branch out from common taboo topics (cited by Hird) by navigating only to the next broader category. It will be noted that, while the new topics still deal with the same general themes, the shift has nonetheless created some distance from the topic in question.

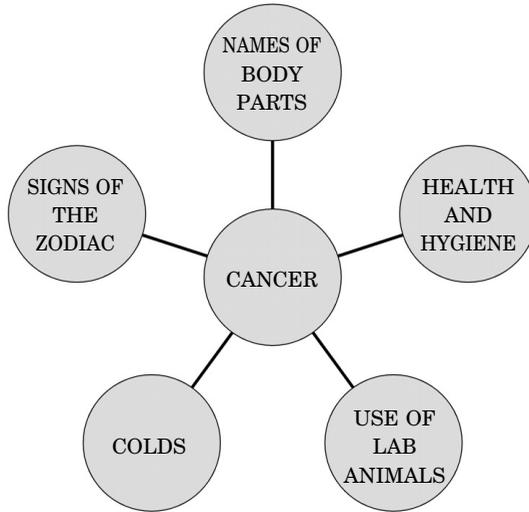


Figure 2: Navigating topics away from cancer

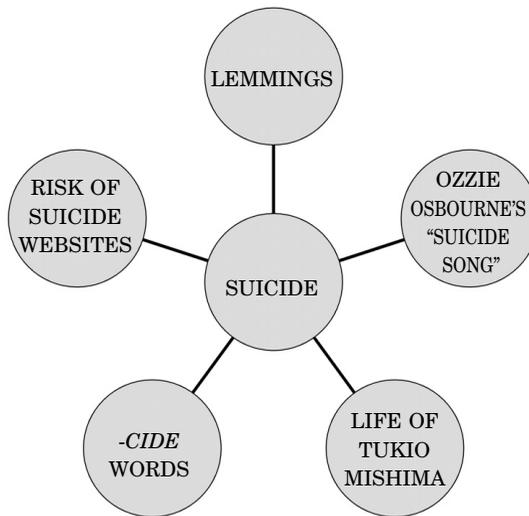


Figure 3: Navigating topics away from suicide

In contrast to establishing taboos, navigating to a related topic is not an attempt to avoid topics—rather, it works around them. Teachers can shift to related topics of less gravity and therefore volatility (cancer → the common cold and cold remedies), the same topic within a different context (suicide → the growing danger of suicide websites), or related language teaching (signs of the zodiac aside from cancer, words ending with the suffix *-cide*). This tangential approach, in which the new topic is in some way related to the original one, allows teachers to defuse sensitive situations more smoothly than would be the case if they were to abruptly discontinue the activity in progress and change to something completely unrelated. Figures 2 and 3 each show only five of many more possible directions in which teachers can navigate.

The role of humor vis-a-vis taboos

Another tangential approach to dealing with delicate classroom situations involves the use of humor. Applied correctly, humor can be used to defuse tense situations. It can be used to create a more relaxed and non-threatening atmosphere in advance of a potentially stressful task. Bell sees humor as “an important means by which social relationships are developed and maintained. Shared laughter creates group cohesion, and once affiliations are established, humor is often used to reinforce and display them to others” (2006). Torok et al. (2000, p. 18) and Ziv (1988, p. 13) have found that teacher humor can improve both student motivation and classroom atmosphere, particularly by relieving stress and tension in unpleasant situations. Gorham and Christophel (1990) have found a positive correlation between teacher humor and student learning. This reinforces their studies on teacher immediacy, which suggests that students are more receptive to teachers who seem less distanced from them, physically as well as psychological—i.e., teachers who

are more relaxed, smile more, stand near the students rather than lecture from the other side of the room, and joke more (p. 46). White reports that humor can have a positive influence on the students' retention of content, creative thinking, and even their blood pressure, respiration, and stress levels (p. 338). While sarcasm is generally regarded as negative in nature, Torok et al. found some evidence that it may sometimes be "used effectively and even constructively" (p. 18). The point is not to have a joke ready for any situation, but for humor to be a recognized resource that the teacher can draw upon as necessary. "Recognized" here applies to both teacher and student, especially in the case of high immediacy teachers from whom humorous remarks are something the students would not be surprised to hear (Quock, 2007).

Humor can be used in lieu of taboo topics, not to avoid topics, but to either maneuver around them or to change the classroom atmosphere enough that the teacher can resume the task at hand. Self-disparaging humor by the teacher, for example, can draw attention away from students whose emotions may be getting the better of them. Humor branching off from the topic in question can also help to defuse sensitive moments: the subjects of alcoholics, war, and capital punishment can be navigated to the humorous aspects of linguistically related themes like chocoholics and workaholics, the "battle of the bulge," and (recollections of) corporal punishment.

This is not to say that humor can be used in any situation: returning to the example of a student who is in a delicate emotional state due to the loss of a loved one, compassion might be a better course of action than levity. Even worse, potentially, is inappropriate humor—while there is a chance that a bereaved student might appreciate a benign joke about angels in heaven, black humor would be certain to have the opposite effect. Applied incorrectly, humor can confuse, offend, and eventu-

ally demotivate students (Torok et al., p. 18; Berk, 2000, p. 153). White (2001) found instances of humor used to embarrass, intimidate, or retaliate against students (p. 343). Respondents to a study by Wanzer, et al. (2006) categorized inappropriate humor into four categories: disparaging humor targeting students, disparaging humor disparaging others, offensive humor, and self-disparaging humor. Disparaging humor targeting students accounted for 42% of all inappropriate humor and, whether the target was individual students or groups of students, the most common basis for this humor was intelligence (p. 185). Even if the teacher's intentions are good, there is always the risk that students may misunderstand the intent of disparaging humor and end up being offended by what was supposed to be an innocent joke or remark. The ability to convey humor naturally and inoffensively is a function of teacher immediacy—Gorham and Christophel found that students do not respond well to nonimmediate teachers who suddenly use humor because it strikes them as out of character, and conclude that “teachers’ use of humor in the classroom is related to learning and that the most desirable learning outcomes are associated with the quality as much as the quantity of humor used in conjunction with other immediacy behaviors” (p. 61). Ziv cautions that teachers who do not have the personality for using humor in the classroom are better off not trying to do it (p. 14).

Conclusion

Many teachers seem to either embrace or shun classroom challenges. For a variety of reasons including administrative and other non-teaching responsibilities, job security, and family responsibilities, some teachers prefer to have as much routine as possible—multiple classes with the same syllabus, the same materials as the previous term, with a maximum of predictability. On the other hand, other teachers are in a

better position to try new teaching situations involving a greater variety of courses, students, etc., and interested in exploratory and experimental teaching, and open to new challenges and experiences. Every teacher has indelible memories about his/her first experience teaching foreign students, students with special needs, native speakers, children, celebrities, mixed-level classes, etc. This receptivity towards new teaching challenges can be almost masochistic in some ways: as with most other human endeavors, it is our bad experiences from which we learn the most and that we remember the longest.

This article does not advocate the abandonment of caution and restraint; rather, it argues against the opposite extreme of overcaution and excessive restraint. Whatever teachers do in the classroom, the manner in which it is presented is critical. Taking, for example, the task of explaining their plans for next summer, students will have different reactions and performances depending on how the task is presented: as a group discussion, an impromptu speech, a written homework assignment, an oral interview, or a written test. Some scenarios clearly raise the stress level immediately. It all depends on how the teacher presents the task. Similarly, much depends on how teachers present potentially controversial or sensitive subject matter, how they respond when students introduce these subjects, and how they respond when students react negatively.

Below are some of the main points raised in this paper:

1. Imposing taboos topics can be counterproductive, tying the teacher's hands and limiting the students' freedom of thought and expression.
2. Taboo topics are difficult to enforce, and even to verbalize, if their parameters are too loosely defined. If defined too broadly, they can be interpreted to include viable subject matter that can otherwise enhance the students' learning and language development.

- 3 . Enforcing taboos on subject matter, especially abruptly, can have an adverse effect on classroom atmosphere—confusing them and making them wonder why the teacher suddenly changed activities.
- 4 . Establishing taboo topics may keep them out of the classroom, but they will not keep them out of the students’ lives.
- 5 . Instead of imposing taboo topics, broadening topics beyond a potential problem and navigating to related topics or other aspects of the same topic enables teachers to change the subject less obviously than suddenly changing to a completely different activity.
- 6 . Humor, especially when used by teachers with high immediacy with their students, can make it easier for teachers to defuse delicate situations.

Imposing taboo topics can be considered to be a pedagogical incarnation of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. There is no substitute for experience, and learning from challenging situations can be a much more valuable experience for teachers than striving to avoid them. Because there is no foolproof way of insulating students completely from corrupting or upsetting influences, taboos serve most of all as a form of censorship that deprives the students from a wealth of learning opportunities. Handled with sensitivity, “taboo topics” can accomplish much more good than harm.

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Taboo Topics: Protective Filter or Counterproductive Censorship?

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Lesson content is often an issue for language teachers, more so for those with younger and/or lower-level students and those seeking to introduce authentic media (movies, music, literature, etc.) into their lessons. Some teachers decide against using certain topics or materials to protect their students from inappropriate subject matter, while others have personal reasons for avoiding certain topics. As a result of these and other concerns, teachers may end up censoring, rather than selecting, lesson content. In trying to protect their students from uncomfortable situations or undesirable influences, teachers risk depriving their students of valuable learning opportunities such as the opportunity to discuss global issues and to utilize communicative functions such as disagreeing and argumentation. What many teachers overlook is the fact that the classroom is not a microcosm of the real world—even if students can be sheltered against certain subject matter in the classroom, they can easily be exposed to it outside of the classroom. The all-pervasive nature of the Internet has not only augmented the reach of the mass media—it has also increased the accessibility of virtually every kind of subject matter on an individual basis. Computer-literate youngsters may therefore encounter sensitive topics and materials anyway—if not in the course of surfing the Internet, then through social networking sites or junk mail (spam). This article will explore how a good understanding of media literacy, tolerance and even humor can be used to shatter unnecessary ta-

boos and broaden the potential scope of classroom topics meaningfully but safely.