

# Teaching Taboo in the Classroom

Georgeta Rață, Elena-Mirela Samfira

Banat's University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine "King Michael I of Romania" Address: 300645  
- Timișoara, 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).

---

\* Corresponding author: Georgeta Rata, Tel +40721810009, E-mail [geta\\_rata@yahoo.com](mailto:geta_rata@yahoo.com)

### 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 Marett (1866-1943) and the Czech Franz Baermann Steiner (1909-1952); *ethnographers*: the French Charles-Arnold Kurr van Gennepe (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 (1846-1894); *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 Christianity, 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 ragas* (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 cunilingus* (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 16<sup>th</sup> century France – and disease); *foods* (fasting in Pre-literate 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, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism), *human flesh* (among cannibalistic peoples), *hyenas* (in Buddhism), *lions* (in Buddhism), *milk* (in East Africa, China, Israel – in combination with milk, in Angola, Burma, Congo, Guinea, 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 Christianity, Hinduism, Islam), *menstruation* (retirement of women to menstrual huts in Japan), *spittle* (in Christianity, 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 Hinduism), *blind people* (in Judaism), *deformed people* (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 aggression 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*, *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*, *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.

#### Acknowledgements

This paper has been written within the framework of the Research Centre “Sustainable Agriculture”, Faculty of Agriculture, Banat’s University of Agricultural Science and Veterinary Medicine “King Michael I of Romania” from Timisoara, Romania.

## References

1. Tekin, M.,. Discussing the Unspeakable: A Study on the Use of Taboo Topics in EFL Speaking Classes. *Journal of Theory and Practice in Education*, 2011, 7(1): 79-110.
2. Hartmann, D., Faulkner, M. "To boldly go...": Taboos in German as a foreign language ... and beyond. *GFL Journal*, 2002, 1: 127-159.
3. Banville, S. (2005). Creating ESL/EFL Lessons Based on News and Current Events. *The Internet TESL Journal*, XI (9).
4. McAndrew, R. & Martínez, R. (2001). *Taboos and Issues*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
5. Ayers, R. Ayers, W. (2011). *Teaching the Taboo: Courage and Imagination in the Classroom*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
6. Fowles, S. M. (2008). Steps toward an Archaeology of Taboo. In L. Fogelin (Ed.), *Religion, Archaeology, and the Material World*. Centre for Archaeological Investigations, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Occasional Paper No. 36. 15-37.
7. American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fifth Edition. (2011). Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company.
8. The American Heritage® Roget's Thesaurus. (2014). Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company.
9. Collins English Dictionary – Complete and Unabridged. (2003). New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.
10. Collins Thesaurus of the English Language – Complete and Unabridged 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. (2002). New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.
11. *Dictionary of Unfamiliar Words*. (2008). London: Diagram Visual Information Limited.
12. Taboo. (n.d.). Oxford Dictionaries. Retrieved June 14, 2015, from Oxford Dictionaries website: <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/learner/taboo>.
13. Random House Kernerman Webster's College Dictionary. (2010). Tel Aviv: K Dictionaries Ltd.
14. WordNet 3.0, Farlex clipart collection. (2003-2012). Princeton University, Farlex Inc.
15. Stevens, P., Jr. (2006). Taboos. In H. J. Birx (Ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Anthropology*, 5. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications. 2153-2154.
16. Rashkow, I. N. (2005). Taboo. (2005). In K. Brown (Ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Language and Linguistics*, 14, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Amsterdam: Elsevier. 451.
17. Wagner, R. (2006). Taboo. In L. Jones (Ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, 13, Second Edition. Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale. 8947-8949.
18. Knight, C. (2002). Taboo. In A. Barnard and J. Spencer (Eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*. London & New York: Routledge. 814-817.
19. Lambek, M. (2001). Taboo. In N. J. Smelser and P. B. Baltes (Eds.), *International Encyclopaedia of the Social & Behavioural Sciences*, T-Z. Oxford, UK: Pergamon Press. 15429-15431.
20. Ellis, B. (2007). Taboos. In W. A. Darity Jr. (Ed.), *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, 8, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Boston, MA: Cengage Learning. 259-260.
21. Taboo. (n.d.). The American Heritage® New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy, Third Edition. Retrieved June 14, 2015, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/taboo>.
22. Taboo. (n.d.). The American Heritage® Stedman's Medical Dictionary. Retrieved June 14, 2015, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/taboo>.
23. Taboo. (n.d.). Dictionary.com Unabridged. Retrieved June 14, 2015, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/taboo>.
24. Bruce, S. and Yearley, S. (2006). *The Sage Dictionary of Sociology*. London: Sage Publications. 298.
25. Holden, L. (2000). *Encyclopaedia of Taboos*. Oxford – Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.
26. Horn, L. R. (2012). Etymology and Taboo. Second Triennial Conference "Methods Past & Current. Methods of Study in Corpus Linguistics, Varieties, Dialects and Standard English. June 17-21, 2011, Boston, MA. 30 p.
27. Taboo. (n.d.). Online Etymology Dictionary. Retrieved June 14, 2015, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/taboo>.
28. Gilbert, R. (2008). Raising Awareness of Class Privilege among Students. *Diversity and Democracy* 11 (3): 7-9.
29. Gao, C. (2013). A Sociolinguistic Study of English Taboo Language. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 3 (12): 2310-2314.
30. Morality and Taboo Syllabus. (n.d.). Retrieved June 16, 2015, from [http://stevenpinker.com/files/pinker/files/morality\\_and\\_taboo\\_syllabus.pdf](http://stevenpinker.com/files/pinker/files/morality_and_taboo_syllabus.pdf).